

John 6:52-58 - To Feed On Jesus

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Well, thank you seems a little simple. It is an absolute pleasure and an honor to be with all of you again.

Been here quite a few times, as a matter of fact, and so this feels a little bit like coming to see old friends. Apparently, older than I thought before I... No, if you brought a Bible this morning, would you turn with me to John chapter 6?

John chapter 6, while you're turning or flipping through your various and sundry eye devices to locate that. I will say thank you to you for your support of Reformed University Fellowship.

RUF is, as we want to say in every conceivable context which we can, is your ministry going to college campuses.

[1 : 04] And one of the great things about being in, I'm going to go ahead and name the number, my 22nd year with RUF, is you get a chance to sort of see the way in which God has moved.

When my wife, actually when I moved to Memphis in 1994 to start working with RUF, RUF at Memphis was the 26th RUF in the entire country.

And this coming year, this fall, we opened our 140th campus across the country. And so it's a joy to see how God has been at work on college campuses.

And you made that possible. And so everywhere we go, we try to say thank you. There's nothing better than coming to a church and being able to look up on the music. And I believe our second song had a musician that was involved in it named Trevor Morgan.

I'm assuming that's Trevor Morgan from Nashville. Is that who Trevor is that we're talking about? Trevor was an RUF guy back from the University of Alabama with Billy Joseph. And there's nothing better than seeing how RUF has sort of left some fingerprints out across our denomination.

[2 : 08] We like to say to people, we are tomorrow's PCA. So come and be a part of what we're doing in RUF. And they gave me that chance to give a shameless commercial. So John chapter 6, beginning in verse 52.

What an insane passage we're getting ready to look at this morning. The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

So Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up in the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.

[3 : 13] This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread our fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever. The Bible says that grass withers and flowers fade away, but the word of our God will go on forever.

I'm assuming in a town loaded with engineers, it's the one thing that I get to ask anyone who says they're from Huntsville. Oh, so are your parents engineers? Why, they are. How did you know? But I'm assuming in a place like this, you found yourself in a context when you're trying to explain to someone something that you actually know very well.

You have gained a measure of expertise over an area, whether it be through time or effort or engagement in the topic. You get it. You understand this topic very well, but there's someone you're speaking to who doesn't.

They don't have the knowledge that you have. Maybe they're much younger than you, whatever. You're searching for some way in which you can illustrate this thing well. But oftentimes the topic is hard.

My wife and I were watching what I guarantee are in one of my wife's top five movies, that great sort of modern classic Hoosiers. Gene Hackman returns to the small town in Indiana to lead the small high school back to great glory and great championships.

[4 : 35] But there's a favorite scene there in the midst of one of the sort of semi-final games where the coach is trying desperately to get one of these young guys to step up his game in terms of his defense.

You remember the scene where he walks in and goes, look, that guy on the inside is killing us. You've got to stick close to him. But he looks at the kid, and you know what he's doing? He's doing this. He's chewing gum.

And so immediately Gene Hackman looks at him and says, think about chewing gum. He goes, I want you so close to this guy that I want you to know exactly what kind of chewing gum he's chewing by the end of the game.

Well, of course, as they go through the game, the guy actually finally, that's an image that works for him. It clicks, and he suddenly defends him well. But of course, in the midst of his defense, he fouls out. And towards the end of the game, as he comes down and sits on the bench, Gene Hackman sort of looks down at him, and he looks back at him and says, it was Dentine.

In other words, what Gene Hackman understood was, I know the game of basketball so well that I know what I've got to get out of you, but I can't sit here and give you some sort of technical explanation for it.

[5 : 48] Let me seize on something that you do know. Okay, that's basketball. What if you wanted to try to illustrate to someone what it means to be connected intimately in the way in which God wants to be connected to his people intimately through the abiding spiritual presence of his son Jesus?

For those of you that are the budding theologians out there, it's the topic of union with Christ. We say this all the time. We talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus.

We talk about sort of the meaningfulness and the depth of intimacy that God's followers have with him through Jesus and with Jesus. But how do you explain that?

How do you illustrate for someone something that profound, something that sublime in practical ways, what that really means? And what you find in the New Testament is you don't get what I'm guessing a bunch of engineers might like, which is a technical manual.

I would like a philosophical paper that I can just sort of sit and look and discern and pull apart and see. No, what Jesus does is he goes into things that he knows we know about every single day.

[7 : 11] Simple things like the relationship of a branch to a vine. He says that's a little bit like the union that I want to have with you, the way in which a sort of branch hangs to the middle of the tree.

He'll go on to say that there's something about this mysterious relationship of marriage that in the midst of I want you to see the kind of intimacy that I want to have with you. In another place he'll say, I want you to realize how a cornerstone sort of fits in with the rest of the building.

In other words, he doesn't sit down and explain and give us a technical manual of what it means to be connected to him so deeply. But what he gives us is an analogy. And in our passage, he gives us the analogy of food, of the simplest of activities and yet extraordinarily profound activities of food.

More specifically, meal time. Jesus says, if you really want to know what it's like to be deeply and meaningfully connected to me, I want you to watch what happens when you as a human being who are in need of regular sustenance and food sit down to eat a meal together.

My guess is in a room like this, you can probably look back and realize amazing things happen over meals. Do they not? Friends are made.

[8 : 33] News gets shared. Stories get told. Battles get fought. Divorces announced. Grievances aired.

Think about the adventures that have happened in your life alone surrounding the issue of a meal. And yet Jesus says, no, but here, if you're going to know what it means to have the kind of connection that I'm wanting to bring to you, I want you to see and think about the way you eat.

Ha ha! He said nervously. So I want to look at this passage through three lenses. Number one, I want to consider the significance of the meal in the Bible.

Number two, I want to look at the problem with our eating and what it is that comes out of us when we consider it. And then thirdly and finally, I want to look at what it means to savor Jesus, to savor Him as the ultimate of meal.

So the first thing, that there is a significance in mealtime. There was a number of years ago when I was meeting with a young person. This was even before I knew Will. Can you imagine?

[9 : 45] That far back. I was meeting with a young man who was in the youth group that I was serving in who had had a disastrous year. In the year prior to that time, he had lost his father to a tragic and brief illness.

And in the wake of that illness, he had had an older brother attempt suicide while he was trying to deal with the grief of it all. You didn't have to be a professional counselor to know that this kid probably needed to talk to somebody.

And yet every time we spoke to him, we always got the exact same thing. Have you ever known people that are sort of hyper okay? Hey, how are things going? Oh, it's great. Everything's fine. It's just good. Everything's good.

When all the while, we all knew, well, okay, we can say whatever's going on, but I know fine is probably not a very good description of it. And so one night while giving this kid a ride home after a youth group, I decided in no sort of pre-decided way to stop off at the little Baskin Robbins.

Do we have Baskin Robbins here? The ice cream places? And so we got him. It took me forever to convince him that I told him to get whatever he wanted to get. And he ended up getting sort of a large brownie sundae.

[10 : 56] You know, with the brownie at the bottom and the three different ice cream and the ice cream flavors on it and the whipped cream and he even got a cherry on top. And so we climbed back in our car for about the 10 to 15 minute ride home while he went to work on this sundae.

And I'm telling you, the most amazing thing happened. The kid cracked like a nut. And with every spoonful, with every spoonful that went in, more of what was going on in his inner world came out.

It was just like, and then when Dad passed away, I didn't understand what was going on. And then my brother got all sad. It was amazing. Amazing to watch happen. Well, years later, I end up having a professional therapist explain to me that there's actually a principle of transference.

That when someone has so much anxiety and sort of restlessness going on inside of them that sometimes it helps to have a focal point of a thing to transfer that stuff onto in order to process the things they're thinking of.

And I suddenly began to realize that food was kind of a big deal. That it sort of came with its own power. And I also realized that if you look throughout the New Testament, actually throughout the entire Bible, it's amazing the big stuff that happens around meals.

[12 : 06] Have you ever thought about this? Our first parents fall into sin over a meal. We find out later on that God institutes a very special meal for his people to remember their escape from Egypt.

The Passover, right? Later on, we hit Jesus sort of coming to earth. God incarnate coming to earth where one commentator said that you either have Jesus coming on his way to being at or leaving from a meal in almost every scene of his life in his New Testament ministry.

Jesus attended a lot of meals. And a lot of stuff happened around those meals. Of course, at the very end of his life, he gets what we're going to celebrate this morning. He gives his people a last supper to remember him by.

And that's not enough. We know that all human history is going to culminate in what? The marriage supper of the Lamb. You start to get the sense that the Bible sees our eating, our meal times, as a whole lot more than the mere instinctual animal way in which we put fuel in and get energy out.

I don't know. There's something spiritual happening around our food and around our meals. Before we go to the next point, why would Jesus choose this just for a second?

[13 : 26] Why would Jesus choose mealtime to be one of the places where we see our relationship with him so clearly? I think, interestingly enough, I would guess to say it's because in the midst of eating, it's one of the few human activities where you're actually supposed to take something inside of you.

You can get weirded out if you think about this too long, about what it's like to eat. You eat. I'm going to take this. I'm going to stick it inside of my body. I'm going to chew on it. I'm going to consume it. I'm going to swallow it so that when it finally gets inside of me, it'll unleash potential.

Power will come once the food makes it inside. I think that's what Jesus is saying. He's saying, I want to be the kind of relationship in your life that crawls up inside of you.

And once inside, once in that key life-giving place of your soul, I will release power out from you that you would not have had were you not in relationship with me.

Meaning, for our purposes, having a relationship with Jesus resists superficiality. There really is no way to have a casual relationship with Jesus.

[14 : 49] There is no way to sort of have him as an appendage, a spoke on the wheel of my life, as it were. He sort of muscles his way in, does he not?

Some of you are in the midst of his muscling his way in. That the more that you try to keep him on the periphery of your life, the less he works and the more difficult he becomes. But the further that he gets in, the more that he tends to sort of rearrange.

He dismantles. He puts back together. But it doesn't happen, Jesus says, until I get inside. You know what it's like? It's like your food. So that's the first thing, the significance of mealtime.

Secondly, though, that brings us to the issue of the problem with food. You know, when Jesus has this conversation with these people and he continues to talk to them about this and the Pharisees, of course, don't get it at all.

They're looking at Jesus and they're going, how in the world can this man give us his flesh to eat? They don't understand that he's making a metaphor. And to be honest with you, I don't really blame the Pharisees in the passage we just read because it's not like Jesus is making it easier.

[15 : 54] The Pharisees are like, how can you give us your flesh and your blood to eat? Jesus doesn't look and say, guys, it's a metaphor. Duh. He doesn't say that. He looks and goes, no, no, no. As a matter of fact, you're on the right track unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood.

I was telling some of the elders before, it's the Halloween season so we'll talk about drinking blood here in October, right? Unless you drink my blood, you don't understand what I am.

And so what happens in the passage right after verse 58 is we find that some of Jesus' followers leave him after this talk. You ever read that? Read it on this afternoon.

Go back and read the rest of the chapter. Some of Jesus' followers are like, okay, and my guess is that you would sympathize with him. You've been following this leader. He's a wonder-working miracle worker and suddenly he says, if you really want to know what it's like to be around me, eat my flesh and drink my blood.

My guess is you would have been like, this has been great but I've got something else I want to do. They leave Jesus. Why? I think for this reason, I think that once all of a sudden Jesus begins to talk about food, he begins to sort of, he opens up a window for us.

[17 : 06] And it's a window of great discomfort. It's a window of great difficulty that's often inside of our souls when we deal with our food. Well, honestly, have you ever thought about the question of food in a way that really felt balanced and healthy to you?

By the way, I'm not saying, do you eat healthy? I know there's plenty of people in our churches and our world who actually are very, very careful about the kinds of things that they eat and think about it, which is actually going to make my point here in just a second.

But have you ever noticed how hard it is to even think rightly about our food and how easily we fall off either into the abuse of it or the ignorance of it when it comes to it?

A number of years ago, I had one of these experiences in life where you think to yourself, okay, I've got a problem, I need to start exercising, and food has become an issue. Most specifically with a little item that we know as the Little Debbie snack cake.

In my home, we were the chocolate chip Little Debbie, we're not one of those Swiss cake roll people. We were more about the chocolate cake, this wonderful little dark chocolate with the slight cream filling and the white chocolate on the top and the sprinkles.

[18 : 23] That was a weakness. The minute that you try to eat healthy and there are Little Debbie snack cakes in the cupboard, you're done as far as I was concerned. But what amazed me were the kinds of things that happened to me psychologically when I would go to the cupboard and see this food there.

I would stand literally and have this thought while looking at the cupboard. I'd be like, you know what, I'm so tired of there being Little Debbie staring me in the face every time I look inside this cupboard.

So you know what I'm going to do? I'm just going to go ahead and eat it so I can remove the temptation from me. You ever had that thought? Well that's insanity is what that is.

That's crazy being applied to the area of food. And so what I suddenly realized is that my food exercises a measure of tyranny over me. Does it not? I worked at Old Miss for, I was on campus at Old Miss for about 12 years as a campus minister and I got to have a lot of conversations especially with women about their relationship to food.

No conversation was more powerful for me though than the one that I had with a young lady who was actually wrestling with a legitimate eating disorder and all of the psychological things that were going on with her were aside the point from this illustration but I remember at one point her saying to me she said, you know Les what really kills me about what I'm going through is that I don't remember the last time that I sat down to enjoy a meal when the meal was about the meal and not about the meal that I was going to eat because of this meal.

[19 : 54] Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. Have you ever sat down to a meal and not been able to enjoy that food because of what this food means about your next meal?

In other words she said, I would sit down and say, well, tonight we're going out, we've got some friends together so I'll just have a salad or vice versa, oh goodness, I've eaten way too much here for lunch and so tonight I'll make sure I don't eat anything tonight.

She said, what I suddenly realized is that even the enjoyment of an individual meal was lost on me because of what it had to mean. I think one of the reasons why Jesus chooses the image of our food is because he realizes that our food exercises a tyranny over us.

In other words, the things that we eat, the habits that we employ in dealing with it, open up a window. Do they not? Is there anything that we often get more self-conscious about than our food?

We have a whole television network devoted to chefs and food, but statistically speaking, we cook less than we ever have. Americans spend \$50 billion a year on dieting and dieting methods.

[21 : 01] At any given moment, 25% of men and 45% of women are dieting. Look, food is more than fuel.

Jesus chooses food, I think, to talk about the relationship to him because it's to do with what only an image of following him needs to do which is to reveal the fact that we have a powerful hurt inside.

That no matter how much I eat or how little I eat or how confused I am about my eating or even how so obsessed I am that I can't have a conversation with anyone else without talking about the things that I eat.

There's something going on. There's a hurt on the inside. There's a pain. There's a dysfunction that comes up out of the life the minute that you begin to think about how, where, when, and what I ought to eat.

You're not going to sit down to a plate of food without realizing that there's something wrong with me. There's something broken in me and all the food in the world has not yet satisfied.

[22 : 08] Which brings me to the third point. This whole question of satisfaction. What does it mean to have Jesus satisfy me not just in the area of a spiritual relationship and not just in a way in which he can redeem my partaking of food but to actually become an overwhelming all-encompassing true food.

That's what Jesus says in the passage, doesn't he? In other words, he says, look, verse 55, for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

He's not saying that this food that we eat or any meal that we eat is somehow illusory and spiritual and foolish but then one day he's going to give us the real spiritual kind.

That's not what he's saying. He's saying that all of the food that you're eating is actually pointing away from itself. It's a signal flare as it were to something much more profound inside of you that you need and that is to be satisfied by me.

My good friend Brian Habig who's the pastor of downtown Perez in Greenville, South Carolina has a great illustration that I shamelessly stole but I asked him if I could use it so he said yes.

[23 : 20] Habig came back to the state of Mississippi for someone who was doing a great service to their community and that is they were clearing out their freezer of all the meat that they killed that particular hunting season.

They're going to clear it all out with a great big party and they were just going to cook everything. And so Habig's friend had him over that night for this big feast that they have and he said by the time they got finished with every conceivable kind of food that they could cook and enjoy they found themselves sort of on the couch and sort of in that zone you know what I'm talking about where you're sort of back like this and you know you're trying to figure out how you're going to get up you know outside and Habig said his friend leaned over to him and looked and said Brian I think I'm meat drunk.

You ever been to that place where there's almost like a sublime satisfaction that's sort of washed over you? Well it's almost as if Jesus is saying I would like for my people to make an association this is the big statement of the sermon Jesus wants his people to make the association between the physical sensation of being deeply satisfied by a good meal and the spiritual sensation of looking to Jesus and saying you are all that I need and whatever I have in heaven and on earth I found it all in you this is what I've been looking for this is what I've been lost to find so how does that happen?

It'd be interesting to end the sermon there wouldn't it? To say you know and we should all be more satisfied with Jesus let us pray but I'm not going to end it there because that's not enough because a sermon is not a sermon until we all of a sudden ask the question okay okay I get you Jesus would like to be to me what a good meal is okay I got it but how does that happen?

Because I didn't have a good eating week this week or I didn't have a very good time feeding on him as a matter of fact he was a distant memory to me this week Jesus was that appendage you were talking about he hasn't gotten inside what does that mean for me?

[25 : 37] Well I think what it means for the soul who looks and says tell me again what it is that is satisfying about Jesus is to remind ourselves of how Jesus phrases this notice what he says there in verse 57 he says look there is a keen relationship from the living father who sent me that I live because of him and if you are in me you have the life of the father that those relationship works together in other words there is a there is a sense in which for me to stand between you on the one hand and my father on the other creates something as powerful in your life as food does for a meal you know what it means?

it means that I will never find my ultimate satisfaction in Jesus until I find out in the gospel that he is satisfied with me because of the cross there it is our satisfaction in Jesus is not tied to us working harder to being satisfied with Jesus rather it is working harder to discover his satisfaction with me in the cross it's where it's headed it's where this meal is going to Jesus is saying so what does that mean?

well it means that the expression that the proof of the pudding is in the tasting means that we really don't get a sense of Jesus satisfaction with me until I begin to taste it so what does it mean to savor Jesus?

I think in one sense it sort of gives a new light on the idea of prayer doesn't it? it's another sermon for another day but to learn to think of prayer time as meal time hmm hold that thought but I think in the most vivid place where we get to taste and see that the Lord is good is here that he gave us a meal a tangible meal with something that's got texture to it it's got liquid to it and so Jesus says if you really want to know what it's like before I leave and plan for my return I want you to remember and to feed on me with this meal there's a foodie writer by the name of Nigel Slater who I had not heard of until I started doing research for this sermon who talked about the time when he was a teenager when his mother passed away very dear and very close to his mother but at one point he says the night after my mother's funeral I came into my bedroom and I looked and saw two little white marshmallows sitting on my bedside table

I'd never been allowed to eat in bed so when my father came upstairs to tuck me in I asked if they were for me of course they are he said I know they were your favorites you see in a school essay that I had written shortly before my mother's death I had described marshmallows as being the nearest food to a kiss soft sweet and tender my father made certain that each night for the next two years I found two sometimes three fluffy sugary marshmallows beside my bedside table because he knew what I missed most of all was my mother's good night kiss and somehow in the marshmallow I saw it that's actually pretty good it's as if Jesus is saying I'm going away I have to go to prepare a place for you but I'm going to be very spiritually present by my

[29 : 23] Holy Spirit but I also know that you need something tangible something substantive so he leaves the nearest Christian spiritual analogy to a kiss in the table we come to be reminded that he's still here and that in the end it's not a fragile truce that he has between us that he still loves us he's still all in and we're still acceptable to him my youngest is a picky eater I actually asked him for permission to use this illustration don't ever use your kids as illustrations in your sermons my homiletics professor said well I asked for this one and he said fine my 11 year old is a picky eater and if you don't mind if you don't mind I know that some of you out there are like oh I've got a perfect cure and expand his palate but it remains very very narrow but if any of you have ever dealt with picky eaters you know that it can turn mealtime into just it can be a battle and for years ever since my son was very small mealtime just had a battle and

I noticed up until about two or three years ago my son had what I would consider to be a normal response to parental pressure to clean your plate and that was just anger he would sit sort of teeth gritting food and put it in and trying to chew it and just looking at me sort of angry and irritated it was appropriate I thought until about three years ago for some reason I began to notice as my son grew that the anger towards me sort of was morphing into a hopeful compliance in other words he began to realize that his father wanted him to eat and so he was constantly looking to see if I disapproved of how he was eating but yet utterly in conflict by the foods that he just didn't like and watching him all of a sudden try not to sort of be against me but to actually please me it just broke my heart and one night

I decided that I would quit talking about what my son ate over mealtime I gave up which is why you parents out there who pulled it off are like well it didn't do it the way I did it well great for you I gave up talking to my son about how he ate you want to know why because it suddenly occurred to me that I would rather my son grow up with scurvy or something rather than go another mealtime wondering whether his father approves of him my satisfaction in Jesus is tied to his satisfaction in me and when I come to this place it's not just for you to feed it's for him to feed you on the knowledge and the certainty that on the cross he has taken away your debt he has taken away your guilt he has set aside all of the other emotional and psychological hindrances that would keep

God as a periphery to my life and says take me in yes I'm going to renovate everything when I'm there but take me in because once there I'll release a power into your life that you couldn't have known was there before so come eat let's pray Lord Jesus I'm glad that you don't have to choose between my good health and your children's joy but that you supplied both in your body and your blood so that as the plate comes around we can see in it not only just sustenance spiritually and otherwise but that we have the kiss that you leave to us every Sunday and as often as we take it we see your love for us so would you pour that upon us at this moment by your spirit and give us the grace to see you more