

SESSION NINE

Unless You Eat

John 6:52-71; John 2:19-21; John 3:3-5

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants watch the crowd ask the question last week forced, and watch Jesus answer it by escalating rather than softening: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. They weigh the strongest case that he spoke symbolically, press it against the text, and stand with the Twelve when the crowd walks out. Tonight the sealed guesses from week one are opened.

Catholic Touchstone. The first announcement of the Eucharist divided the disciples, and the Lord's question, "Will you also go away?", echoes through the ages as an invitation of his love (CCC 1336). The Church has never found a way around John 6, and has never wanted one: what cannot be apprehended by the senses is held by faith (CCC 1381).

What You Need to Know

Tonight is the summit of the study's argument and the resolution of its longest game. Prepare more carefully than usual, and prepare your own heart: this session asks the group to watch people leave Jesus, and to decide where they themselves stand. Handle the steelman honestly. If the symbolic reading is presented weakly, the night proves nothing; if it is presented at full strength and the text still answers it, the group will own the conclusion for life.

The scene resumes at John 6:52 with the crowd asking exactly the question verse 51 forces: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Watch what Jesus does with the question, because it is the interpretive crux of the chapter: he does not soften, qualify, or explain the offense away. He escalates. "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" (6:53), and then he adds drinking blood, the single most viscerally forbidden act in Israel's law (Leviticus 17:10-14), to the scandal already on the table.

The Greek sharpens what English flattens. Through verse 53 John uses the ordinary verb for eating (*phagein*). From verse 54 onward, at precisely the point where a clarifying metaphor would be expected, John switches to *trogein*, a blunter verb: to chew, to gnaw, to munch, in classical usage the word for animals feeding. "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (6:54), where "eats" translates *trogein*, literally chews. Some scholars caution that *trogein* had softened somewhat in common usage by the first century, and honesty keeps that caution on the table; but John chooses this verb four times running at the exact moment of maximum offense, and uses it again of table fellowship at 13:18. The word choice runs toward realism, not away from it.

The comparison the group will make live tonight: everywhere else in John, when hearers take Jesus too literally, the text rescues them. Nicodemus hears "born anew" and thinks obstetrics; Jesus clarifies: born of water and the Spirit (3:3-5). The Jews hear "destroy this temple" and think architecture; John clarifies: he spoke of the temple of his body (2:19-21). John is a Gospel that characteristically corrects literalism when literalism is the error, a pattern that recurs at 4:31-34 and 11:11-14 as well. Here, uniquely, there is no correction. There is escalation, then a harder verb, then the loss of the crowd, and Jesus lets them go.

Verses 60-66 must be felt, not just read. "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" comes from disciples, not enemies. And verse 66 records the only place in the four Gospels where a body of disciples abandons Jesus over a point of doctrine: "After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him." He does not chase them. He does not shout a clarification at their backs; the one sentence that could have done it, "friends, I spoke figuratively," is never spoken. Instead he turns to the Twelve: "Will you also go away?" Nobody pays that price for a metaphor he could have cheaply explained.

The steelman tonight deserves your respect, because serious Christians hold it. Its full-strength form: (1) Jesus himself supplies the interpretive key at 6:63, "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life," so the eating language is spiritual, meaning believing. (2) The greatest of the Latin fathers, St. Augustine, wrote of this chapter, believe, and you have eaten: *crede, et manducasti* (Tractates on the Gospel of John 25.12). (3) Jesus routinely speaks in startling images he does not mean literally, the door, the vine, and Scripture already contains eating-as-believing imagery: Wisdom says "those who eat me will hunger for more" (Sirach 24:21). (4) Drinking blood was abominable to Jews; a command to do it literally would be unthinkable, therefore it must be figurative. Present all four points as their best advocates would, and let the group strengthen them further before anyone answers.

The answer, drawn from the text the group now knows: (1) Verse 63 says "the flesh," not "my flesh." "The flesh" in John's idiom most naturally names unaided human nature and perception (3:6; 8:15), the mindset that cannot receive this teaching; Jesus never says my flesh is of no avail, and he cannot, since verse 51 has just declared his flesh given for the life of the world, and John's entire Gospel begins with the Word become flesh (1:14). Nor does "spirit" mean "symbolic" anywhere in Scripture; spirit is what is most real, the realm of divine power. (2) Augustine must be quoted whole: the same Augustine wrote, commenting on the Psalms, that no one eats that flesh unless he has first adored it, and that we sin by not adoring. Augustine held faith and realism together; quoting him for symbolism alone is selective evidence. (3) The door and the vine offended no one and cost nothing; images interpret themselves in context, and nobody walked out over a metaphor anywhere else in the Gospels. Sirach's Wisdom says her eaters hunger for more; Jesus promises that the one who comes to him "shall not hunger" (6:35) and that whoever eats this bread "will live for ever" (6:58), and where Wisdom offered instruction, Jesus attaches his offer to his death, flesh given for the life of the world. (4) The blood objection cuts the other way: precisely because the language was maximally offensive, the metaphor theory has to explain why Jesus chose it, refused to soften it, and spent his crowd on it. And the mode of eating the Church confesses is sacramental, not carnal; no one has ever taught the crude cannibalism the objection imagines. The offense is real, but it is the offense of the Incarnation continued, not of butchery.

The night ends where the chapter ends: Peter, with no theory in hand and the room emptying, answers the question the study's memory verse preserves: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of

eternal life." And then the sealed guesses are opened. Run the ceremony with warmth and without triumphalism: some guesses will be eerily close, some far afield, and every one of them proves the same point, that week one's question, what teaching could cost Jesus his disciples and still not be softened, has now been answered by Scripture itself in front of everyone.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight harvests Session Three's severe little sentence, the lamb must be eaten. The Passover pattern, sacrifice completed by eating, stands behind John 6:53's logic: it is not enough that the Lamb be slain; the Lamb must be consumed. The group may reach for this on their own during the steelman press; if they do, they are doing exactly what the study built them to do.

Leviticus 17:10-14, the blood prohibition, gives the offense its voltage: blood is life, and belongs to God alone. Have it ready as background. The scandal of drinking blood is precisely that it means receiving the life; what was forbidden of animal blood, Jesus commands of his own, because his life is now given to be ours.

Leader-side holds, still in force: the Last Supper, the institution narratives, every liturgical connection, and the words this is my body. All of it is next week, and next week hits hardest if tonight ends with the group standing in the emptied synagogue with Peter, holding a promise that has not yet been given its form.

Voices of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch

Letter to the Smyrnaeans, c. 107 AD

St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, held by ancient tradition to be a disciple of the apostle John, wrote on his way to martyrdom that certain heretics abstain from the Eucharist because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, the flesh which suffered for our sins. Within living memory of John's Gospel, in the church of Smyrna, whose bishop Polycarp is named a disciple of John by St. Irenaeus, the realistic reading was not one option among several; it was the test of communion.

St. John Chrysostom

Homilies on the Gospel of John, 4th century

St. John Chrysostom preached on this chapter that Christ mingled himself with us so that we might become one body with him, not by love only but in very fact. How many say, I wish I could see his face, his form, his sandals: behold, he says, you see him, you touch him, you eat him. He gives himself not to be looked at merely, but to be our food.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

Mystagogical Catecheses, 4th century

St. Cyril taught the newly baptized not to judge the matter by taste, but to hold with full assurance what faith affirms. Though sense suggests one thing, he said, let faith make you firm; judge not by the palate but by the Lord's own declaration, for he cannot lie. The senses report the surface; the word of Christ reports the reality.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1336.** The first announcement of the Eucharist divided the disciples, just as the announcement of the Passion scandalized them: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" The Eucharist and the Cross are stumbling blocks, the same mystery, and the Lord's question, "Will you also go away?", echoes through the ages.
- **CCC 1381.** That in this sacrament are the true Body and true Blood of Christ cannot be apprehended by the senses, St. Thomas says, but only by faith, which rests upon divine authority: the word of the Son of God, than which nothing is more true.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · LEADER ONLY

The sealed guesses open tonight, and only after verse 66 has been walked. The ceremony belongs at Question 7, when the group has just watched the scene they were asked to predict eleven weeks ago. Keep it warm, voluntary, and brief; the point is not who guessed best but that Scripture itself has now answered week one's question in front of everyone.

Run the steelman at full strength or not at all. Assign its four points their full force in Question 5 and invite the group to strengthen them before anyone rebuts. If your group includes people who hold the symbolic reading, tonight succeeds only if they recognize their own best case in your presentation of it.

Guard the Last Supper absolutely. The words this is my body do not enter the room tonight, not even in prayer. Verse 27's future tense, the food the Son of man *will give*, is still open when the night ends, and next week closes it.

Thread C surfaces naturally: the lamb must be eaten. If the group connects Passover's logic to 6:53, bless it; that is Session Three paying off on schedule.

Do not let the night become a debate club victory lap. People the group loves hold the reading the text answers tonight. The tone is Peter's: to whom shall we go?, not, we won.

Session Goals

1. Watch Jesus answer "How can this man give us his flesh?" with escalation: the double amen, the added blood, and the harder verb.
2. Discover John's pattern with misunderstood sayings, and its deliberate absence here.

3. Build the symbolic reading at full strength, press it against the text, and let the text answer.
4. Stand in verse 66 with the Twelve, hear Peter's confession, and open the sealed guesses.

Time Note · One Hour Forty-Five with a Shared Meal

0:00 to 0:30, Table. Grace before the meal, eat together without hurry, and let the two Win questions surface naturally over food. Do not turn the table into a classroom.

0:30 to 1:20, Build. Fifty unhurried minutes. Bibles open at the table or moved to the living room, whichever your space favors. The Dig Deeper box is part of the flow, not an extra, and the live discovery moments deserve real hunt time.

1:20 to 1:35, Send. Two questions, no answer boxes, room for silence.

1:35 to 1:45, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer.

If the night truly runs long: Compress Question 3 by citing John 2:19-21 and 3:3-5 yourself rather than having the group hunt them. Treat cuts as emergencies, not expectations; at this length the session should breathe on its own.

AT THE TABLE

Simple food tonight, and set the mood for weight rather than festivity. Have everyone place their sealed My Guess sheets in the center of the table before grace, where they will sit, visible and unopened, through the whole meal.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer · Grace Before the Meal

Lord Jesus, you never softened a word of truth to keep a crowd, and you never will. Bless this meal and this company, give us honest minds and Peter's heart, and when your teaching is hard, hold us close. Amen.

Win · At the Table (30 minutes with the meal)

1. Has a friendship or community you belonged to ever hit a breaking point over something one side would not compromise? What was it like to watch people choose?
2. What is the hardest thing you have ever been asked to accept on someone's word alone, because you trusted the person more than you understood the claim?

Leader note: these are dinner conversation, not an agenda item. Ask them while people are still eating, and let the meal take its time.

Build · Opening the Word (50 minutes)

1. Read John 6:52-58. The crowd asks the exact question last week left hanging: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Track Jesus' response closely. Does he soften the claim, explain it as figure, or something else? List every way verses 53-58 raise the stakes rather than lower them.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He escalates, on every axis. He opens with the double amen, his most solemn oath formula. He adds drinking his blood, the one act Israel's law forbade most viscerally, since blood is the life and belongs to God alone (Leviticus 17). He attaches ultimate stakes: no eating, no life; eating, eternal life and resurrection. And he repeats the claim five times in six verses, each time more concretely: my flesh is food indeed, my blood is drink indeed.

The one thing available to him that he never does is clarify. A single sentence, I speak figuratively, of believing, was available to him and never spoken. The absence of that sentence is the loudest thing in the chapter, and the rest of tonight measures it.

2. The Greek raises the stakes further. Through verse 53 John uses the ordinary verb for eating; from verse 54 onward he switches to *trogein*: to chew, to gnaw, in classical usage the word for animals feeding. Literally, "he who chews my flesh." Why might John change verbs at exactly this point, and what would we expect instead if Jesus were correcting a too-literal crowd?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

If the crowd's error were literalism, this is the moment for a gentler word, a spiritualizing turn, the way a teacher backs a class off a misreading. John records the opposite: the verb gets more physical exactly where the offense peaks, four times running, and John uses the same blunt verb later of eating bread at table (13:18).

Keep the honest hedge: some scholars note *trogein* had softened somewhat in everyday first-

century usage, so the verb alone settles nothing. But as evidence of direction, it only points one way. A writer managing a misunderstanding chooses softer words; John chose the word with teeth in it.

DIG DEEPER

The discourse has an architecture worth seeing whole: verses 35 to 47 speak the language of coming and believing; verses 48 to 58 shift to eating and drinking, and the intensity only rises, ordinary eating giving way to *trogein*, chewing, at verse 54. Some argue the second half merely restates the first in metaphor, but the movement runs the wrong way for that: restatements soften, and this one hardens. The chapter reads less like a metaphor explained than like a gift unveiled in stages, believing first, then the scandal of what believers will be given to eat.

3. Live discovery: John has a habit when hearers take Jesus too literally. Find John 3:3-5 and John 2:19-21, and describe the pattern. Then look back at chapter 6. Where is the pattern here?

Send half the table to Nicodemus and half to the temple saying, then compare. The punchline is an absence; let them find the hole.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Nicodemus hears born anew and asks about entering the womb a second time; Jesus clarifies: born of water and the Spirit. The Jews hear destroy this temple and count forty-six years of construction; John clarifies for the reader: he spoke of the temple of his body. When literalism is the error in this Gospel, the text rescues the reader, again and again (see also 4:31-34; 11:11-14).

And here, at the teaching that cost Jesus more listeners than any other, the pattern is missing. No aside, no he spoke of believing, no rescue. In its place: escalation, a harder verb, and a departing crowd he does not correct. John knew how to mark a metaphor. The mark is not here, and John, of all writers, does not forget things.

4. Read John 6:60-63. Disciples, not enemies, call this a hard saying, and Jesus responds with the verse this whole debate turns on: "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." Before anyone answers it, what is the strongest case that this verse, and this chapter, teach that the eating is symbolic, meaning believing?

Build the case at full strength and invite the group to add to it. It gets answered in the next question, not this one; do not let anyone rebut early.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

At full strength, the case runs: first, verse 63 looks like Jesus' own interpretive key, spirit not flesh, so the eating language is spiritual, and the spiritual eating is believing, which verses 35 and 47 have already made central. Second, no less a father than St. Augustine wrote of this chapter, believe, and you have eaten (Tractates on the Gospel of John 25.12). Third, Jesus talks this way habitually, I am the door, I am the vine, and Scripture already uses eating for receiving wisdom: Sirach's Wisdom says, those who eat me will hunger for more. Fourth, a command to drink blood would be unthinkable to any Jew; Jesus could not have meant it literally, so the crowd's error was taking him

literally at all.

Say it plainly to the group: this is a serious reading held by serious Christians who love the Scriptures, and if it is right, the crowd left over a misunderstanding. The question is whether the text lets it stand. Now press.

5. Now answer the case from the text this study knows. Work through its four points: what does verse 63 actually say, and not say? What did Augustine say elsewhere? How did the door and the vine land compared to this? And which way does the blood-horror actually cut?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Verse 63 says the flesh, not my flesh. In John's idiom the flesh most naturally means unaided human nature, what is born of the flesh is flesh, you judge according to the flesh, the mindset that cannot receive divine things. Jesus cannot be saying his own flesh avails nothing: twelve verses earlier he called it the bread given for the life of the world, and this Gospel opens with the Word became flesh. And nowhere in Scripture does spirit mean merely symbolic; the spirit is what is most real. As for Augustine: the same Augustine wrote that no one eats that flesh unless he has first adored it, and that we would sin by not adoring. He held believing and real eating together; quoting half of him proves half a point.

The door and the vine offended nobody and cost nothing; live metaphors interpret themselves, and no crowd ever walked out on one. Sirach's eaters hunger for more; Jesus promises that the one who comes to him "shall not hunger" (6:35) and that whoever eats this bread "will live for ever" (6:58), and his offer is welded to his death, flesh given for the life of the world, which no wisdom-metaphor carries. And the blood objection boomerangs: precisely because the words were maximally offensive, the symbol theory must explain why Jesus chose them, repeated them, hardened them, and paid for them with his crowd, when one clarifying sentence was always available. The Church's answer has never been the cannibalism the objection pictures; the eating is sacramental, real but not carnal, as the coming weeks will show. But the realism itself, the text will not surrender.

6. Read John 6:66-71. Count the cost. What happens at verse 66, what does Jesus do about it, and what does Peter say when the question comes to the Twelve?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Verse 66 is unique in the four Gospels: many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Not Pharisees, disciples. It is the only recorded mass desertion over a teaching in Jesus' ministry, and he lets them go. No chase, no shouted clarification, no renegotiation. Then he turns to the Twelve and asks the question the Church has heard ever since: Will you also go away?

Peter's answer is the posture this study has been building toward for nine weeks: Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Notice what Peter does not have: a theory, an explanation, a mechanism. He has a person he trusts more than he trusts his own bewilderment. That is not credulity; it is the most rational act in the chapter, faith resting on the track record of

the one speaking. Some things are true on the word of the only one in a position to know.

7. The envelopes. Eleven weeks ago you each sealed a guess: a teaching so hard that disciples would abandon Jesus over it, one he would refuse to soften. You just watched the scene. Open your guesses, and whoever is willing, read yours aloud. How close did you come, and what does the exercise itself prove?

Keep it warm and unhurried. Every guess, near or far, makes the same point; say so out loud.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

However the guesses land, the exercise has done its work: before anyone knew where this study was going, each of you testified in writing that you expected a breaking point, and Scripture supplied one, this one. The teaching that cost Jesus many of his disciples at Capernaum (6:59, 66) was not the Trinity, not the moral law, not the cross itself. It was: eat my flesh, drink my blood, or you have no life in you.

And mark what your own sealed handwriting now witnesses: nobody needed to invent a hard reading of John 6. The hardness is native to the text; the crowd heard it, the disciples heard it, and Jesus, given every chance to soften it, sharpened it instead. Whatever we do with this chapter, explaining the offense away is the one move the chapter itself forbids.

8. One promise is still open when the night ends. Jesus has said what must be eaten, and paid dearly for saying it, but he has not yet said how, or when, or in what form. Look back at John 6:27 and 6:51: what tense is the giving in, still? Where does that leave us?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Still future, both times: the food which the Son of man will give; the bread which I shall give. Nine weeks of promise, a synagogue emptied over its realism, and the gift itself has still not been placed in anyone's hands. John 6 is a promissory note written in the strongest possible language, awaiting a night on which it is cashed.

That night has a name, and every one of you knows it. Next week: an upper room, a Passover table, and the future tense becoming a present one. Bring everything you are carrying.

Send · Taking It With You (15 minutes)

1. Jesus asked the Twelve, "Will you also go away?" If you are honest, what teaching of his puts that question to you personally, and what would Peter's answer sound like in your own words?

2. Peter trusted the person past the edge of his understanding. Where in your life right now is Christ asking for exactly that kind of trust, belief that outruns explanation?

No answer boxes here. Ask, wait, and let silence do some of the work.

Live It This Week

1. Memorize Peter's confession this week and pray it once a day, especially anywhere faith feels harder than usual: Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.
 2. Reread John 6 start to finish in one sitting, now knowing all of it, and mark the verse that lands hardest on you personally. Bring the verse next week.
 3. Think of one person you know who finds this teaching impossible. Do not argue with them this week; pray for them by name, daily, with Peter's words.
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Scripture Memory Verse

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

John 6:68

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, the crowd went home and you let them, because love does not negotiate the truth. We are staying. We do not understand everything you said tonight, but we know who said it. To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Amen.

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Passages in order of use

- John 6:52-58 · the question and the escalation; trogein
- John 3:3-5 · live discovery: Nicodemus corrected
- John 2:19-21 · live discovery: the temple saying corrected
- John 6:60-63 · the hard saying; spirit and life (steelman crux)
- John 6:66-71 · the desertion; Peter's confession
- John 6:27, 51 · the future tense, still open
- John 6:68 · memory verse

Leader only · do not distribute or read aloud

- Leviticus 17:10-14 · the blood prohibition (background to the offense)
- Sirach 24:21 · Wisdom's eating imagery (steelman material, answered in flow)
- John 1:14; 3:6; 8:15 · the Word became flesh; John's idiom for "the flesh"
- John 13:18 · trogein again, at table
- Exodus 12:8-10 · the lamb must be eaten (Session Three, if the group reaches for it)
- St. Augustine, Expositions on the Psalms, on Psalm 98(99) · no one eats that flesh unless he has first adored it
- St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John 25.12 · crede, et manducasti (steelman material, answered in flow)
- Matthew 26 and parallels · hold absolutely until next week