

When Jesus Brings Division **Luke 12:49-59**

We are continuing in our sermon series through Luke's gospel and we will be picking up where we left off, toward the end of Luke chapter 12.

And to be honest, our passage this morning is heavy. It is difficult. It might even be surprising for you to hear these words of Jesus if you've never read this portion of Scripture before. And so what I want to do is read through the entire passage, then I'll pray for us, and then we will walk back through the text together.

Luke 12:49-59

49 "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! **50** I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! **51** Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. **52** For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. **53** They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

54 He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming.' And so it happens. **55** And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. **56** You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

57 "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? **58** As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. **59** I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny."

Again, this is certainly a heavy and confusing message from the mouth of Jesus, rich with warning but it is rich with encouragement and hope as well, but before we walk through it, let me pray for us...

Well, let's go back to the beginning of our passage and walk through it together...

Luke 12:49

49 “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!”

Jesus begins with giving a surprising reason for his incarnation. In fact, if we polled our church this morning and asked why you think Jesus came in the flesh we would have, no doubt, many wonderful biblical answers. You might refer to the words of Jesus when He said that He came to bring life and life abundant. Or that He came to serve and not be served, to give his life as a ransom for many, or that He came to call not the righteous but sinners.

But I’m guessing that none of us would say Jesus came to bring fire on the earth. But that is what Jesus says here, he came to cast fire on the earth. Now, fire in Scripture most often is a symbol of God’s judgment. So Jesus is saying, that part of the reason He came was to bring judgment. And as if that wasn’t hard enough for our eyes to read and our ears to hear, Jesus goes on to say that His desire is that the fire was already being kindled. And again, that might be strange to hear or hard to hear, but these are the true words of Jesus.

But as we’ve read through Luke, this shouldn’t be too much of a surprise if we remember what John the Baptist said of Him earlier...

Luke 3:16

16 John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John the Baptist said Jesus is coming and He will bring the good and amazing gift of the Holy Spirit but He will also bring judgment.

And this is inevitable not just in His work but because of His person. The author of Hebrews describes God in this way...

Heb. 12:28-29

28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, **29** for our God is a consuming fire.

God in His holiness, burns, as it were, in purity and power. And this was no less true as God the Son came in bodily form and lived in holiness.

Fire accomplishes one of two things: either it consumes, or it refines. And there is no escaping it, regardless of who you are.

One commentator explains it by saying, “Fire is the spiritual power exercised by the Lord through His Word and Spirit - to the undoing of those who reject Him and to the refining of those who believe in Him.”¹

¹ Norval Geldenhuys as quoted in Ryken, *Luke*, vol 1, 695.

Jesus, the second person of the Godhead, stepped into this broken and fallen world among a broken and fallen humanity, and his holiness never failed to burn. His life and work brings with it either judgment or refinement.

Luke 12:50

50 I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!

What does Jesus mean here when he speaks of his baptism? Does he mean water baptism? No, he's already been baptized, that marked the beginning of His earthly ministry, so that is not what He's talking about here. Jesus is not looking back, He is looking forward. He is looking ahead to what awaits Him. And what awaits Him is the cross. The baptism that Jesus is talking about here is a baptism of judgment.

And using the word baptism here brings with it incredible weight. The Greek word we have here for "baptism" is "baptizo", which means to immerse or to submerge. So think what Jesus is saying here. In looking forward to the cross, Jesus says, there is coming the day where I will be immersed in God's judgment. I will be submerged, I will be consumed by the wrath of God in His judgment on sin.

As RC Sproul has said, "God the Father was not playing with His Son on the cross." It was real judgment. It was real wrath from the All Holy God poured out on His sinless Son for the sins of His people.

And Jesus is living with this emotional anticipation as that moment draws nearer and nearer day by day. It's as if He is saying, "I can't wait to cry out from that cross It is finished!"

Why? Because this is ultimately why He came.

What I want to make sure we grasp in these first two verses is that if we coil or wince at the words of Jesus, that He came to bring judgment, we should remember that He first would take that judgment on Himself on our behalf. Verse 49 says that the fire of judgment will be cast on the earth, but verse 50 says that Jesus will bear that judgment for His people. There is incredible grace in these verses.

Luke 12:51

51 Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.

Do you think I am here to bring peace? If you do, that is the wrong assumption. Which is confusing isn't it? Because there is a ton in the Bible about Jesus and peace, especially if we think about Christmas season. A lot of the verses we read at Christmas speak of the peace Jesus brought into the world.

Isaiah 9:6

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of **[Division? No!]** Peace.

In other words, Jesus isn't merely trying to bring peace to humanity, He is the Prince of Peace, this is who He is and what He does.

And another verse at Christmas in Luke 2, when the angels announce His birth to a group of shepherds, the angels break out in praise saying...

Luke 2:14

14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

So, Jesus' incarnation, His coming to earth, is described as a peace-bringing event.

And the Bible teaches us that the work Jesus has done really has brought peace...

Eph. 2:17

17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

Rom. 5:1

1 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

So it is not unthinkable to read the words of Jesus here in Luke 12 and be confused. Jesus does bring peace. But here he says he doesn't bring peace, he brings division. Which is it?

Well, through work of Jesus in the gospel and our repentant faith in that work, we really do find peace with God. However, though the gospel brings with it peace with God, it also brings with it a loss of peace with others. In fact, reconciliation with God can mean separation from people.

The Bible teaches that there is a coming day when God will stand as Judge over the entire world and will at that time separate those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ. Jesus talked about this in Matthew 25, describing it like a shepherd who separates His sheep from the goats. And at that time all of humanity will be divided. Those who are Christ's and those who are not Christ's will be separated for all eternity. There will be an eternal, literal division.

However, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the coming age has been "inaugurated" and though we await that great day when it will be "consummated", or fully realized, we today live with some of those new, ultimate realities. So, for example, we are saved and we will be saved. We are new creations but will be made new. We live in the overlap of this already-but-not-yet reality of God's kingdom and that includes

this division. One day we will be separated physically. But right now believer and non-believer live side by side, but we are divided in many other ways. We are divided in our beliefs. Divided in our hopes. Divided in our loyalties. Divided in our allegiances, we as Christians calling Christ Lord and everyone else calling Christ something less. And we see the effects of this division on a daily basis, don't we?

It shows up in every sphere of life as we try to live out our faith in Christ among those who do not share our faith. We see this at work, as we try to approach our work with integrity while others might cheat to get ahead. We see this at school as we try to live godly lives of purity while others give themselves over to ungodly and fleshly desires. We see this in culture at large, as our country and our cities grow increasingly post-Christian rejecting the values and beliefs that we as followers of Jesus hold dear. We all know this tension all too well, don't we?

And Jesus points out specifically here that this extends to even our closest personal relationships...our families.

Luke 12:52-53

52 For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. **53** They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

When someone in a family comes to Christ it affects their relationships with everyone else in the family who are not followers of Christ. Some of you have experienced this, some of you are living that reality today. You may be the only Christian in your family. You may have an unbelieving husband or an unbelieving wife. You may have unbelieving parents or unbelieving children, and you know all too well the tension that can bring to your relationship.

As you speak of Christ, read your Bible at home, commit to being a part of the local church, commit to being generous with your time and resources, as you desire to raise your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, this division that Christ has brought to your home becomes more and more evident. There may come ridicule. There may come exclusion. There may even come abandonment. We have brothers and sisters in Christ in some parts of the world that risk being killed by their own families when they come to Christ.

Or maybe for others, it is not your profession of faith that brings the division, it is your desire to serve the Lord in full-time ministry that your family disagrees with. They may see it as a second class calling, a waste of your education and potential. By God's grace this wasn't true in my life but I had missionary friends who experienced this. They believed that God had called them to move overseas to share the gospel and plant churches, but their families were upset with them. Upset that they would move, upset that they would take the grandkids away.

There are a number of ways that Jesus brings division rather than peace in our relationships with others.

But the inevitable truth here is that in history, the dividing line is what one does with Jesus. Either you are with Jesus or you are against Jesus. Jesus demands your allegiance or your rejection. There is no neutrality.

And this should challenge the way we often approach nonbelievers. Ministries, preachers, and individual Christians will often do anything they can to ease the demand, ease the tension over Jesus by changing the message of Jesus, his demands for repentance, his rightful place as King and Lord over each individual life, to make the message of Jesus less divisive. This is one of the reasons why we typically preach through whole books of the Bible, passage by passage, because it keeps us committed to seeing *all* of Scripture, hearing *all* of Jesus' words, being confronted with the *entire* counsel of God. If not, we would be tempted to ignore difficult and divisive passages like this one.

But Jesus is very clear here, that there is no neutrality when it comes to Him. You are either for Jesus, or you are against Jesus. So as we experience this division, we shouldn't be surprised at all. Jesus said this is a reality for all who would follow Him. But it is important for us to remember that this is a temporary reality. For now we are called to carry our cross and follow Him in the midst of many others who hate that we do, but there is a day when God's people will live in true peace with God and each other for all eternity.

Luke 12:54-56

54 He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming.' And so it happens. **55** And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. **56** You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Jesus here shifts his attention from his disciples to the crowds that have gathered around him and he begins to rebuke the crowds for not recognizing the work of God in the life and ministry of Jesus. And he likens it to interpreting weather patterns.

I am from Oklahoma and my wife is from Kansas, and every spring down there is tornado season. We are from an area of the country with the very appealing nickname "tornado alley." And I can remember many times growing up having to take shelter because a tornado was in the area, we saw a lot of them. They are common, so everyone there can see the clouds forming and they know what to look for as they look for potential tornados.

We are still new here in Rochester, so we are getting used to your weather patterns. And we joke that it seems like any time something strange happens, someone just says it is "the lake effect." I don't know what that means all the time, but it seems to happen often.

Well, like anywhere, Israel has its weather patterns. From where they were, when clouds came from the west, it would be coming from the Mediterranean Sea so this of-

ten brought rain. If the winds came from the south, it came from the desert so that brought intense heat to the area. And everyone there knew these things. He says if they are able to interpret the weather, why can't they interpret spiritual things as well?

In fact Jesus calls them "hypocrites" here. And the fact that Jesus calls them "hypocrites" hints that they possibly did recognize the work of God in Jesus but they were simply unwilling to acknowledge it. That in their rebellion they *wanted* to ignore it. It would be like seeing a tornado touch down and acting like nothing is happening though you are getting hit with hail and debris flies all around you.

Jesus, the One who came to bring fire, is here and the people are going about with their lives as if everything is normal, and He is nothing special.

But then Jesus seems to shift gears to something totally unrelated...

Luke 12:57-59

57 "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? **58** As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. **59** I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny."

It seems that Jesus now is simply giving some instruction about how to handle disagreements that will go to court. He says if someone is taking you to court, it is often better to just settle out of court before you stand in front of a judge. But Jesus is not just speaking to the way we should handle civil law cases. He is using it as an analogy about standing before the great and ultimate Judge on judgment day.

The idea here being, if you were going to court, and your guilt was undeniable, wouldn't it be better to settle before going to court rather than go to trial when it is too late? All you will be left with is your just sentence for your debt. Well, in the same way, we owe an infinite debt because of our sin. All of us have transgressed the law of God. We have broken the law of God and we now owe a debt. It is a debt that is undeniable in the face of an All-holy Judge who knows all things. And should we want to take this to court where we stand in front of the Judge, in hopes of defending ourselves, there will be no hope for acquittal. We will receive our just sentence for all we've done in rebellion to God and His law.

Which is a terrifying thought, isn't it? Because we know ourselves. We know that though we might describe ourselves as "good" people, we are far from perfect. Our sins are undeniable.

So the greatest question that we could ever wrestle with and seek an answer for, is how can we then stand before the Judge? Can anyone be seen as innocent before the Judge? Can any of us be declared righteous? Again, this is a terrifying dilemma.

But Jesus offers hope here. Again, He says, isn't better to settle with the accuser before going to court? Isn't it better to make things right before it's too late? Meaning, there is the possibility to do so.

John 5:24

24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

But how does that work? How can we be the sinful rebels we are, the breakers of God's law that we are, and yet declared as innocent? I mean, does God just ignore our sin? Does he turn a blind eye?

When Jesus uses a courtroom illustration He really is helping us understand salvation in its legal sense. Again, we have broken God's law and now we will stand before the Judge and give an account. And again the question that is pressing is, how can we stand before God as *righteous* rather than *unrighteous*? Innocent rather than guilty? The answer to this is the doctrine of justification.

The doctrine of justification was the heart of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther said of the doctrine of justification, that it is the article by which the church stands or falls. It was a needed protest by Luther and the Reformers in the face of a Church that taught that our standing before God is both a work of the grace of God *along with a work of our own*.

But when will our works ever be righteous enough for the holiness of God? Never. It is like going to court and trying to defend yourself though there is undeniable evidence that you are guilty. It's hopeless. Justice will prevail and you will be found guilty.

But the gospel is called good news for a reason. One commentator describes justification as revealed in Scripture as God "righteously righteousing the unrighteous."² Or, God righteously justifying the unrighteous. And this done not by ignoring our sinfulness, not accepting our lousy offering of righteousness and just saying that is good enough. No, God "righteouses" us. That is, he gives us the righteousness that we need to be innocent.

At the heart of justification is what is called imputation and it is essential in understanding the work of God in the gospel. It is the act by which Jesus took our sin, our unrighteousness on Himself, our sin was "imputed" to Him, and payed the debt on the cross that we deserved. And now, by our repentant faith in that work, God "imputes" His righteousness to us. He "righteouses" us.

2 Corinthians 5:21

21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So not only is our sin debt canceled, we are credited with righteousness. It is this gospel truth that Paul is rejoicing in and describing in Philipians 3...

² Andrew Naselli, "The Righteous God Righteously Righteouses the Unrighteous" in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), ebook 327.

Philippians 3:8-9

8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith

Laying aside his own attempts at righteousness, which is never more than unrighteousness, God has given Paul the righteousness of Jesus. And this comes through faith. And this is not just true of Paul, but all of us who do the same.

Luther would give the Latin phrase to describe this doctrine as *Simul Justus et Peccator*, simultaneously just and sinner.

Because of God's work through Jesus, we are both undeniably sinful before our Holy God yet graciously justified before Him as well.

So, Jesus says in Luke 12, before you go to the great and final court and you stand before God the Judge, make things right now! Be justified now! Be made righteous now! Don't delay.

And before we finish up, I don't want you to think that salvation is nothing more than just this legal declaration, as glorious as that is, it is actually much more. The good news only gets better. When we repent and confess faith in Jesus not only are we justified but we are also adopted into the family of God. It's as if you were in court, undeniably guilty and hopelessly alone, and based on the work of Jesus, the Judge declares you innocent AND takes you home adopting you into his family.

Galatians 4:4-5

4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, **5** to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

J.I. Packer famously wrote in his classic work *Knowing God*, "In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship, and establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is a greater."³

So if you are maybe new to the Bible, new to Christianity, and all this legal talk leaves you feeling cold, know that it is vitally important to your understanding gospel, but that is only a portion of what it means to be made right with God. In the gospel, God is your Judge who becomes your Father.

³ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder, 2005), 233.

CONCLUSIONS

So just to wrap this passage this morning, a few conclusions for us:

1. Jesus Brings Peace with God, but he also brings division with others.
 - So we ought to count the cost, and when it seems too difficult, ask which would be worse: division with others or division with God?
 - Expect it, don't be surprised when others, even those close to you who do not know Christ are put off by your faith in Jesus. That is part of following Jesus in this age. So we take up our cross and we follow the way of our Savior who was treated with hostility and ridicule. And we do so with joy knowing that we share in his sufferings.
2. As difficult as it is to be at odds with others, especially with those in your own family, let me encourage you to remember that you do not stand alone. You have been adopted into a new family. A family that has embraced the dividing nature of the gospel because they, too, know that Jesus is worth it.

Keep praying for your family. Keep living a life that glorifies the Lord. And continue to hope that one day they too will see the beauty of Christ just as you have.

3. If you are not already, by your repentance and faith in Christ, you can be justified before God today. As Jesus says here in Luke 12, why stand before the judge? Settle your accounts now while there is still time. Lay down your own attempts at righteousness in repentance and take hold of the righteousness of Christ by faith.

VERSES

Luke 12:49-59
Luke 12:49
Luke 3:16
Hebrews 12:28-29
Luke 12:50
Luke 12:51
Isaiah 9:6
Luke 2:14
Ephesians 2:17
Romans 5:1
Luke 12:52-53
Luke 12:54-56
Luke 12:57-59
John 5:24
2 Corinthians 5:21
Philippians 3:8-9

SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

In the final passage of Luke chapter 12, Jesus brings some difficult, and perhaps confusing, words. Here, Jesus says that he “came to cast fire on the earth” and bring division rather than peace. This passage is rich in warning, but it is also rich in encouragement and hope.

I. Jesus came to cast fire and create division - Luke 12:49-53

If someone asked you why Jesus came in the flesh, how would you answer?

What does Jesus mean when he said he “came to cast fire on the earth” (12:49)?

What does Jesus mean when he said he came to give division and not peace (12:51)?

When have you experienced the dividing nature of the gospel in your relationships?

Spend time praying for each other as we live with this division.

II. Jesus is the clear sign of God’s work - Luke 12:54-56

According to Jesus’ rebuke in Luke 12:54-56, what were the people guilty of?

What might cause us from clearly seeing the work of God in the world?

III. We should settle our debt with God while we can, and thankfully, we can! - Luke 12:57-59

What debt do we all owe to God? How can any of us settle that debt?

Try to give your best definition of the biblical doctrine of “justification.”

Why did J. I. Packer describe justification as the “basic blessing” and adoption as the “crowning blessing?”⁴

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 167-168.