

## The Great Divider

May 26th, 2013

Luke 12:49-59

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

Why did Jesus come into the world?

If you think of the ministry of Jesus, there are several places where Jesus tells us directly why He has come...where He describes what His mission is in the world:

*"<sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost'" (Luke 19:10).*

*"<sup>13</sup>I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13)*

*"<sup>45</sup>The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).*

*"<sup>10</sup>I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).*

*"<sup>46</sup>I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (John 12:46).*

This morning in Luke 12 we're going to look at another of Jesus' purpose statements for His life and ministry, perhaps the most profound, puzzling, and certainly the most counter-cultural, of them all. So let's read verses 49-59 of Luke 12, and then we'll consider from these words, 1. What Jesus came to do, 2. What effect it has on us (that is, Christ's disciples), and 3. what it demands from everyone.

**"I came to cast fire on the earth"**

So add this to your answers of what Jesus came to do: "<sup>49</sup>I came to cast fire on the earth..." What does it mean? My best guess is that Jesus is

referring to judgment. When He says, "I came to cast fire on the earth," He means, "I came to judge; to bring the fiery judgment of God's wrath upon the world." Here are three reasons why I believe that:

### **1. The Old Testament frequently refers to God's judgment as fire**

*"<sup>15</sup>For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. <sup>16</sup>For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many" (Isaiah 66:15-16).*

*"<sup>6</sup>Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him" (Nahum 1:6).*

*"<sup>1</sup>For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch" (Malachi 4:1).*

### **2. John the Baptist's description of the coming fire that Jesus would bring**

*"<sup>16</sup>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 with fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:16-17).*

So John says when the Messiah comes, He is coming to judge, and He is going to divide (12:51) humanity into two categories, and the chaff is going to be burned, so examine yourselves and make sure that on that day you're not burned with unquenchable fire (3:9). And now Jesus, the Son of Man, the One whose straps John is not worthy to untie, says He has come to cast that fire, to bring judgment.

### **3. The immediate context of Luke 12 points towards a coming judgment**

That's what we saw last week from verses 41-48, the Son of Man is coming at a time you don't know, so be found ready, ie, be found faithfully engaged in the Master's work, so that when He comes to judge, you're blessed with the reward of faithfulness and not cut into pieces and thrown with the unfaithful, be careful, for those who have been entrusted with much, much will be demanded (and without interruption of a new heading), "I came to cast fire on the earth..." So it seems to me that the fire is a description of that coming judgment.

And how Jesus longs for that fire to be kindled (v.49b)! If you wonder where is Jesus in the midst of all the tragedy and evil that abounds, you can be assured that He is longing even more than you for that day when His universal reign of justice fills the cosmos, inasmuch as He is infinitely more holy than you.

### **Fire, but First, a Baptism**

And the thought of it makes Jesus shift His thinking, from fire to water: "<sup>50</sup>I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" This is why I said that this "I have come" statement might be the most profound, because here in just a couple of sentences you have Jesus saying not only that He has come to *bring* judgment (casting fire on the earth), but that He has also come to *bear* judgment. It's as though Jesus cannot think of the fire He has come to bring without also thinking of how first the fire of God's judgment was going to fall on Him.

He describes it here as a baptism (cf. Mark 10:38), an immersion in suffering and pain and misery and divine judgment and wrath (a flood is a picture of distress and suffering, cf. Psalm 69:1ff). And what distress He has until His suffering is accomplished. This word, *distressed*, means to be seized, attacked, tormented.

This is an amazing statement that gives us a glimpse at the inner life of Jesus, and of the constant agony and distress and pain He endured in

coming to accomplish our salvation. We get another glimpse in Gethsemane (especially 22:44), Jesus begins to sweat blood. If the prospect of this baptism was enough to get the eternal Son of God down on His knees, begging God to spare Him if there was any way possible, if even the prospect of this baptism pushed blood out of his pores (which the medical people say is a sign of severe shock), what must the experience of it have been?

But here we're seeing that it wasn't just that moment in Gethsemane, on the eve of His execution, that brought agony to Jesus' heart, but throughout His life and ministry life, the very thought of that moment in which the wrath of God, the fire of God, the devouring fire of God's wrath on sin and evil is going to fall into His heart, He is so tormented even thinking about it. If that was His experience, does it not give you a vivid picture of the wealth of His love for you, and of the horror of rejecting that love and facing this fire on your own? If it brought such agony to the Son, what would it do to you?

### **The Prince of Peace Brings Division**

So we have here an incredible, profound statement from Jesus about His mission, what He has come into the world to do. He has come to bring the fiery judgment of God's wrath upon all unrepentant wickedness and sin, but in love and mercy He has come first to be consumed by that awful fire for all who would have His amnesty. Jesus *propitiates* the wrath of God for all who flee in faith to Jesus for refuge (Romans 3:23-25).

Secondly, then, what effect does that fire have upon us who have fled to Jesus for refuge? The effect is that it brings division:

<sup>51</sup>*Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?* (Jesus seems to know this is going to be shocking; He knows the angels announcement was that the Savior was going to bring peace among men, 2:14) *No, I tell you, but rather division.* <sup>52</sup>*For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against*

*two and two against three. <sup>53</sup>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."*

Jesus is the Great Divider, and oftentimes that division will cut right across those whom we love most. In doing it this way, Jesus is showing how preeminent He means to be in the hearts of those who call on Him as Lord and Savior: "<sup>37</sup>Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Jesus is teaching that to be devoted to Him means to hold on to Him and treasure Him and cherish Him so much that even the closest earthly bond is compromised and complicated when there is not unity in Jesus (cf. 14:26).

Many of you have tasted a measure of this. Not death, maybe not even disownment, but real alienation, separation, criticism, ostracism, disappointment, tears. It's inevitable that if you're passionate about Jesus, and committed to living for His fame, you're going to experience division and conflict. But Jesus comforts us with this assurance:

"<sup>29</sup>Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, <sup>30</sup>who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life." That's one reason why embracing the church as God's family is so precious and vital, because for many of us, the people of God are family in a much truer sense than those who are called by our last name.

### **Why Jesus is Divisive**

Now it's worth considering why it is that following Jesus divides people, because this is one of the strong criticisms that our culture levels against Christianity: "you are divisive and narrow-minded and arrogant because you think you have the truth, and that Jesus is the only way." We need to be clear that this is not the real reason for division.

Which position is more arrogant: 1. the Christian, who submits to the God of the Bible, a book that has stood the test of time for thousands of years, and we humble ourselves before that and stand on what it says, even when it rubs us the wrong way (which it inevitably does at some point), because this is how God has revealed Himself through history, or 2. A person with no history, no sacred literature to back up their belief, no submission to anyone or anything outside of their own feelings, saying they know that God is this way or that way, only based on his own opinion. Which is more arrogant?

On the other hand, we need to acknowledge that a lot of people have done many foolish things, said foolish things, had arrogant, critical attitudes, in the name of Jesus, who've represented Jesus very poorly by acting out-of-step with gospel. No one kneeling at the foot of the cross can say to another sinner, "You wicked sinner, how could you live this way?" To the degree that they do, they either show their immaturity in faith, or show they don't have genuine faith at all.

Following Jesus is divisive, not because Christians are arrogant, but because when you shine the light of Christ, those who hate the light and love the darkness of their sin will hate that light. They want to live for their sin, and their selfishness, their autonomy, and you remind them that they aren't god, and they will hate you because of that.

### **Discernment Demanded**

So Jesus has come to cast the consuming and cleansing fire of God's judgment, and the result is that those who follow Him need to be prepared to experience some of that end-times division even now in their closest earthly relationships. Finally, what does this coming demand from everyone? I word it this way because in verses 54-59, the audience of Jesus' teaching shifts from His disciples (see verse 22) to the crowds (v.54a). So Jesus has a particular word here not just for His followers, but for all people. And the basic answer of these verses is

that the coming of Jesus to cast fire demands from all people *discernment*. Specifically, discernment of the times that are present, and of the trial that is to come.

Verses 54-56 describe the need to discern the times. The argument goes like this: you know how to make right observations about the future based on present circumstances when it comes to something as insignificant as weather patterns; why won't you use those same rational faculties discern this circumstances of the dawn of God's Kingdom in My ministry and receive salvation from your sin! It's astonishing how much energy people devote to the weather (it's cloudy...better close the windows!), yet give so little thought and attention to your eternal destiny!

In that moment, Jesus was referring to the evidence that He'd given them through His healings and exorcisms, that in Him the Kingdom of God had dawned. Now we don't see those same kind of miracles so often today, but I would argue that the existence of this gathering, the existence of the Church, 2,000 years since anyone has seen Jesus, is every bit the miracle that a healing or an exorcism is. Some of you resist coming to Jesus because there isn't enough evidence, and Jesus would call you a hypocrite. Look around!

Look at the times! You can interpret the skies and make a decision on what to wear. Interpret millions of people worshiping a Man who lived an insignificant life across the globe 2,000 years ago and told others that they would burn in hell if they didn't love Him more than their own family members! What rational explanation is there for this, but that He rose from the dead to guarantee that He is who He said He is! Jesus is King, He's come to establish His royal reign, and He will come again as Judge, so get right with Him now while you have time!

Which is what verses 57-59 deal with: discerning the trial to come, and, the danger of not having your moral debt settled before we appear

before the Judge of the universe to give an account for your life. "Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" Why can't you see that you are a sinner, owing a debt that you cannot pay? And many people today can't see it. They think they're "good people". They are ignorant that their account needs to be settled.

Imagine a mutiny on a naval ship. The captain and officers are forced off of the ship by the rebels and left on a deserted island. They finally raise the alarm and a naval fleet is sent to recapture the mutinous ship. The ship is boarded, and they find that the mutineers have kept the ship in tip-top condition. In fact, it's in even better condition than it was before the mutiny. They've spent their own money and given their free time to care for the ship. None of that will make any difference to their ultimate fate, because all of them are rebels. The best moral acts of an unbeliever are nothing more than polishing a ship that you have taken over in rebellion against Lord and Captain of the universe, Jesus.

No matter how many good deeds you have done, you won't get your account settled unless you come to the Judge on His terms of peace, which is through the blood and righteousness of Jesus. The Great Divider came to make peace for all who would receive it: "<sup>19</sup>In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...<sup>21</sup>For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Jesus came to bring the consuming and cleansing fire of God to earth. The whole human race is divided by their relationship to Him. He endured with great distress the immersion of God's holy indignation against our mutiny, the fire of God's justice fell upon Him, to settle our eternal debt so that we could be free. If you have not settled accounts with Him, do so today! And if you have, extend this demand to the ends of the earth. Christ's teaching was meant to be carried on by us, until He comes again to judge the world in righteousness. Do not be ashamed of the word of His grace!