

Setting the World on Fire Luke 12:49-59

In just a few weeks we're going to be in the thick of the Christmas season, and if you can hear it above the deafening noise of the tinsel and the gifts and the feast, you'll hear the message that Christ came to bring peace on earth. Maybe you'll even get a Christmas card with a rainbow and a dove and the words Peace over it in gold letters. But did Jesus come to bring peace on earth, and if he did, why in so many parts of the world are our brothers and sisters persecuted and suffering for their faith? Well, this morning I want us to see three things out of this passage that will help us understand why the world is as it is and how God responds to that: Jesus polarizes; Jesus judges and Jesus suffers and saves.

Jesus Polarizes

V51: "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division."

Now, we've called this whole series in Luke's gospel, Meet Jesus. And the reason for that is that for some of us, the real Jesus is something of a stranger. We've been introduced to him, but we don't know him, not properly anyway. And Luke's intention is that we do that; that we come face to face with him. And if we come to this gospel expecting a nice, tame, sandal-wearing, pot smoking Jesus, proclaiming 'peace, man, make love not war' we're in for a shock! Because Jesus says plainly here, I haven't come to bring peace, I've come to polarize and divide people.

Now if before we read this passage I had asked you, did Jesus come to bring peace on earth, yes or no, how would you have voted? Yes for peace or no not for peace? And the reason that many of you might have said yes to peace is because in one sense that is exactly what he did come to do and has done for you in your own life and in the life of your family. Seven-hundred years before Jesus' birth, Isaiah saw His coming and prophesied, (Is 9:6) '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 Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, *Prince of Peace*.' At Jesus' birth the angels filled the skies, singing with joy, (Lk 2:14) "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace* among those with whom he is pleased." Before Jesus went to the cross, as He was preparing His disciples for His departure He encouraged them, (Jn 14:27) "*Peace* I leave with you; *my peace* I give to you."

And in the middle of a world in turmoil Jesus grants us His real, genuine, storm-calming inner peace. And you may have experienced that and it is more than psychological. In Ephesians 2:13-17 Paul says that it is through Christ that the age-old hostility between Jew and Gentile can be ended and we can each know peace with God and each other: 'But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. *For he himself is our peace*, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, *so making peace*, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and *preached peace* to you who were far off and *peace* to those who were near.'

You see Jesus doesn't just bring us peace; He is our peace. And through the gospel He speaks peace to hearts that are striving and guilty and chasing and running and anxious and hostile.

And yet, the message of that peace, Jesus tells us, becomes the very thing that divides people. Because even though the gospel brings peace and an end to hostilities between God and the one who receives His offer of peace, it also provokes division, and hostility on the part of those who reject it.

Now, why is that? Why is there such a thing as a persecuted church? Why, if you volunteer the fact that you are a Christian at work or in the university or at school, may that, sometimes, be met with mocking? Why the persecution? Why the ridicule?

The answer is simply that Jesus is divisive. He polarizes. You cannot be neutral about Him and if you are neutral about Him, you don't know Him, and you haven't properly heard His teaching. Because when you do know Him, you have to decide either for Him or against Him. Because, unlike anyone else, His teaching is entirely wrapped up with His person. You can't say of Him, 'he's a good man, but I don't care for his teaching'; or 'I like what he says, but I'm unimpressed by Him, as a character'. When it comes to Jesus, you can't nail your colours to the fence like that. He paints you into a corner where you've got to decide.

You see, His teaching makes claims about Himself that polarize. He claims that He and He alone is the way the truth and the life and that no-one, repeat no-one, gets to God except through Him. He's the Way and He's the gate. He claims that if you have seen Him you have seen God the Father. He claims to be the one who will quench every thirsty soul and feed every starving heart. He claims that He will be the one to judge every human on the last day when everyone stands before the Judgment Seat. Those are some claims, and if you heard those kind of words from anyone else you'd phone the local asylum and ask if anyone was missing. This man, and what He says about Himself, does your head in, you get brain fever thinking about it: who is He to claim such things, to center everything around His own person. You've got to either reject it all, or kneel in worship before Him as God. There is no no-man's land. He polarizes because He is so totally exclusive.

But He also polarizes because He makes demands upon us. He has something to say to how we live and what we are living for. He trespasses on to our private property where we have erected a big 'Keep Off' sign: the private property of our thought life, our bank balance, our sexual ethics, our business practices. And we need to decide, is He in charge or am I? Is He the owner and I'm the tenant or am I the owner and He's an unwelcome vagabond trespassing on my land.

Jesus is right. He brings division, division which extends even within families, as Jesus himself, and some of us, have experienced: Father against son and son against father. And when Jesus says that He is quoting from the prophet Micah, chapter 7:1-7, where Micah is writing a commentary, an op-ed on society adrift from God, and you don't know who you can trust, and those you thought were

friends turn out to be enemies. That is what Jesus elicits. It's a collision of world-views, a test of loyalties. And Jesus has come as the King, to claim possession of His kingdom. But mankind, his subjects, are in rebellion, we have taken up arms against the King. And He has come with an offer of a full pardon to rebels who will lay down their arms. And the question is will we accept His rule or not. Will we accept his offer or not? And as one commentator (Earle Ellis) says, it is that call to decision that is a call for division.

You see, when it comes to an absence of peace, it's not Jesus, or the gospel that is at fault. It's not the message of peace that's the problem. It's our hearts. When it comes to Jesus, we've all got to decide where we stand. Do we bend the knee, or do we take up arms? There can be no middle ground. And when we choose to reject His offer, we reject Him and side with his enemies.

So Jesus polarizes, and as a result, he judges.

Jesus Judges

V49: 'I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!'

Now, how's that for a gentle Jesus meek and mild mission statement! I've come to bring fire on earth; I've come to set the world ablaze!

But what does He mean by that fire? Is He referring to the fire of the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost and He longs to see the world ablaze with the spreading fire of the gospel? Or is it the refining, purifying fire of persecution, because that might fit here.

I don't think it's either of those. Jesus is talking here about how He polarizes and divides, and when John the Baptist announced Jesus' coming he said, Luke 3:16-17: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 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."

Jesus is going to be like a farmer, John said, who gathers all the wheat fresh from the harvest, and all the chaff is mixed in with it, and he takes his winnowing fork, and he starts separating and dividing the wheat from the chaff. He keeps throwing it up, and the wheat comes down and the chaff blows away, throwing it up and letting it fall, throwing it up and letting it fall. And when he has separated them out he takes the wheat to the barns and the chaff he burns.

And Jesus says, 'I haven't come to bring peace, but division; to divide the wheat from the chaff, and to kindle a fire on the earth'. And He's talking about the fire of judgment that awaits those who reject His offer of peace.

But why? Why does He talk like that? You might think, 'What grounds could Jesus have for suggesting such a thing? I didn't think Jesus was like that.'

Well Jesus gives two reasons in this passage for why the fire of judgment will come. Firstly, because the people of his generation, and so many after them, have

failed to discern the times: v56 “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?”

People could correctly read the weather and the implications of that, of the cloud building up, or the wind changing direction, but they failed to see the significance of Jesus’ coming. The Messiah has come and they refuse to see it. And it’s no different with us: we can be great at forecasting the weather, or predicting who’s going to win the world series, or judging how the markets are doing, but when it comes to the most important issues,- who this man Jesus is, and what are the implications of that for me? - we shut down our hearts and choose to ignore the warning signs.

People could read the clouds, but not the storm clouds gathering for coming judgment. They could read the wind, but not discern the direction the wind of the Spirit was blowing. And nothing changes. People still fail to rightly interpret the significance of Jesus’ coming on the one hand, and of our own frailty and mortality on the other.

But the second reason Jesus gives as to why judgment is coming is that we are all spiritual debtors. That’s the point of his parable in v57-59 at the end of our reading. The man in the parable is in debt. He owes money. And his accuser is taking him to court. He’s living on borrowed time. He needs to make peace with his accuser quickly, before he faces the judge and the inevitable punishment that will follow.

And Jesus is saying, you are that man. We all are. We are all spiritual debtors: in debt to God because of the things we don’t do but we should do, and do do which we shouldn’t. And as a result God has a case against us: a summons has been issued; a writ has been served. We have been called to stand before the Judge of all the earth. And unless that slate of debt is wiped clean, Jesus is clear that there will be no release. No deliverance from judgment, until the very last, smallest copper coin of debt has been paid. But here’s the terrible point of Jesus’ parable: how can a man pay the debt, how can a man who has been thrown into a debtors’ prison raise the money to pay off his debt? He can’t. He will never be released. Which is why Jesus says, in v58, that we need to make the effort, while there is still time, to settle our account and pay our debt to God.

But how can we do that? How can any of us pay our debt and avoid the inevitable judgment?

Well, we get a clue in Jesus’ surprising words in the second half of v49. “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!” Jesus, did you really say that? Jesus, how could you wish that the fire of judgment was already lit? If you are longing for this day to come, Jesus, what hope is there for humanity, for us?

Well, don’t we all, deep down, long for justice to be done and wrong to be righted? Isn’t there, innate within each of us, a longing that evil be vanquished,

wickedness paid for, and injustice and suffering and death be abolished? And just as the silversmith's furnace cleanses the dross from the silver, so the fire of God's judgment cleanses the evil from His creation. That's the first reason Jesus can long for the fire to be kindled, to see creation cleansed of sin and sickness and suffering and satan.

But that raises a question doesn't it? Will the fires of judgment reach as high as me? If all stand guilty before God, if we all stand as debtors before him, unable to pay, won't I be consumed by the fire of judgment as well? The prophet Malachi says in Malachi 3:2, "Who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when he appears? *For He is like a refiner's fire.*" No one can stand before the fire of his coming.

So what hope is there? Is all lost? And the answer is no – it's the second reason Jesus longs for the fire to be kindled – because He knows that when the fire of God's judgment falls, it will fall first upon Him and by so doing He will save many. That is why He wishes it were already kindled.

Jesus Suffers and Saves

V50: "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!"

Now, what is this baptism that He is talking about? What is this that Jesus sees coming that so greatly distresses him, that attacks and assaults Him, that He feels the weight of pushing Him down? Well, the other place He uses just such terminology is in Mark 10. Do you remember when the disciples James and John come to Him, and they've realized Jesus is someone great and He's setting up some kind of a Kingdom and they want in on this and they come asking Him that if He is going to be King they want to be His chief lieutenants, sitting at his right and left hand. Jesus, if you are going to be president we want to be your prime ministers. And Jesus' response is (v38): "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

He's talking of His death. He's talking of the cross. When He prays in the garden of Gethsemane and asks His father if it's possible that the cup pass from Him, He's talking about the cup of God's wrath poured out upon sin. And Jesus knows what His disciples could never comprehend until afterwards, that He was going to drink the cup of God's wrath down to its dregs. The fire of God's judgment was going to fall upon Him, the flood of God's wrath was going to pour over his head and he would sink under its waves. And he saw it coming, this baptism, as JC Ryle puts it, 'of suffering, of wounds, of agony, of blood and of death.' And the thought of it weighs heavily upon him, it distresses him, in the garden the emotional, psychological, spiritual pressure is so great he sweats blood. He hemorrhages through his sweat glands. As Jonathan Edwards says (*Agony of Christ*), he senses 'that wrath that was to be poured out upon him' he understands the 'bitterness of the cup which he was to drink' he was 'brought to the mouth of the furnace [of wrath] that he might look into it... this was the thing that filled his soul with sorrow and darkness' to the point of almost overwhelming Him.

And yet He goes through with it. He drinks the cup, he plunges into the furnace of wrath, he bows his head as the judgment for our sins falls upon Him. Why? Why would he do that? He does it for His Father's glory and to throw open the door of salvation that as many as want might come in. He knew that if he didn't bear the fire of judgment, we would have to, and because of His great love for you, He became what the Bible calls your propitiation, the very thing that absorbs and turns away God's wrath from you. He was consumed in the firestorm of God's wrath so you need never be.

That is the gospel that divides, because it is an assault on every other religion and our own human efforts to pay off our debt. Because Jesus has come and paid it for us. The question is, will you accept it?

But as well as dividing, this gospel also has more positive effects. It becomes the reason why we can love and pray for our enemies and those who persecute us or our brothers and sisters, because we realize we are no better than they, and they need to hear the King's message of peace as well.

It becomes the motivation to either go as missionaries to the nations or to give of our resources to fund those who go, because we know there is a judgment coming and we want as many to be saved as we have been saved.

It is the reason we can forgive others when they sin against us, because we know that it isn't saying, 'o that doesn't matter' – it does matter and either they will pay the price for their sin, or Jesus has already paid the price. We can forgive because we know justice has been or will be done.

And finally it is the answer to our own guilt and sense of worthlessness and the sliming, staining effects of sin, because we can look to Jesus and know he has paid our debt in full, our sin is atoned for, God's righteous wrath has been quenched.

Jesus polarizes and He judges, but because He suffers He is able to save those who will turn to Him in faith.