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## THE DIVISIVE JESUS

Luke 12:49-59

By

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May 16, 1999

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Luke Lesson 62

## The Divisive Jesus Luke 12:49-59

Most of us have had experiences that have forever changed our lives, either for the better or for the worse. We didn't know when we got up that morning that before night our lives would be different, but that's what happened. Maybe you got in an accident that left you permanently impaired. Or, positively, maybe you met a person who would become your lifelong friend. January 5, 1974 was such a day for me, when I walked into an apartment in Long Beach, California, and someone said, "Steve, this is Marla."

Hearing about the Lord Jesus Christ is just such a watershed experience, whether a person recognizes it or not. To hear about the unique person of Jesus Christ and what He came to do is a fork in the road of life. From that point, either you go down the path toward eternal life or you turn away toward eternal destruction. But you cannot hear about Jesus Christ and remain the same. He draws a line in the sand. Either you cross that line and receive the salvation He offers or you stay on your side of the line and eventually face His judgment.

Jesus has just warned the disciples of the need to be ready for His coming when He will judge every person (12:35-48). Those who have received the most light will receive the stricter judgment. Now (12:49-53) Jesus shows that His purpose was to cast fire on the earth and that fire would cause division, sometimes even among family members. So the disciples need to be prepared for conflict. Then (12:54-59) Luke records Jesus' words to the whole multitude, where He chides them for being able to analyze the weather, but they ignore the signs of the times, namely that Messiah is in their very midst. He uses an illustration of a person who is going to get dragged into court with a losing lawsuit. If he's smart, he will settle quickly before he loses everything. Even so, those who are in debt to God would be wise to be reconciled to Him now, before it is too late. So the message for us is:

Since Jesus draws a line that forces us to take sides,  
we had better be quick to get on His side.

1. Jesus' coming draws a line that forces us to take sides (12:49-53).

There are three ideas in these verses: The *purpose* of Jesus' coming (12:49); the *means* by which He would accomplish that purpose (12:50); and, the *consequences* of His purpose (12:51-53).

- A. The purpose of Jesus' coming was to cast a fire on the earth (12:49).

Jesus plainly states His mission: to cast fire upon the earth. That purpose was not yet fulfilled, because He adds, "How I wish it were already kindled!" The question is, what did Jesus mean by the word "fire"? Commentators differ, but most of the views overlap in their thrust, even if the specifics differ.

Some say that it refers to the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, when tongues of fire rested on the disciples. Others say that it refers to the preaching of the gospel or God's Word through His messengers. Others think it refers to the persecution and trouble that would accompany the preaching of the gospel through the disciples (J. C. Ryle catalogs the above views and their adherents in *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 3:99). Others think it refers to judgment or purification.

Since fire can have all of these allusions in Scripture, it seems to me that the context of Luke 12 should be the major factor in determining Jesus' meaning here. Jesus has been talking about the coming judgment (12:4-5, 8-10, 20-21, 35-48). He goes on to talk further about judgment (12:58-59; 13:3, 5, 9). John the Baptist warned the people about the wrath to come when "every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (3:7, 9). John predicted that the Messiah would baptize believers with the Holy Spirit and fire, but He warned that Messiah would "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (3:16, 17).

One commentator draws together these different nuances of the meaning under one theme when he says that fire refers to "the spiritual power exercised by the Lord through His Word and Spirit on the strength of His completed work of redemption—to the undoing of those who reject Him and to the refining of those who believe in Him" (Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* [Eerdmans], p. 367). I would contend that the predominant

theme is judgment. While Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, His ministry necessarily also resulted in the judgment of those who reject Him. William Barclay states, "In Jewish thought fire is almost always the symbol of *judgment*." Then he adds, "However much we may wish to eliminate the element of judgment from the message of Jesus it remains stubbornly and unalterably there" (*The Gospel of Luke* [Westminster Press], p. 169).

To encounter fire is by nature a catastrophic, life-changing event. Robert Fulghum (*It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* [Ivy Books], p. 3) tells the odd story of a fire crew that broke into a house with smoke pouring out of the window and found a man in a smoldering bed. After the man was rescued and the mattress doused, they asked, "How did this happen?" The man replied, "I don't know. It was on fire when I lay down on it." That story strikes us as funny because it is so strange. Who in their right mind would lie down on a burning mattress? You can't be passive about fire. You have to deal with it or it will consume you!

Jesus' coming is like a fire. You can ignore it and you will perish or you can get on the right side of it and it will purify the dross out of your life. But the one thing you cannot do is to be neutral toward it. Jesus draws a line that forces us to take sides. Jesus goes on to show that ...

B. The means of casting that fire was the cross (12:50).

Almost all commentators agree that when Jesus speaks of the baptism He has to undergo, He is referring to the cross, where He would be immersed under the flood of God's wrath against sin. While as the eternal Son of God, Jesus came to this earth for the purpose of going to the cross to redeem sinners, yet as being fully human, the thought of the cross deeply distressed Him. The agony of the cross for Jesus was not only the physical suffering, as terrible as that was. The worst agony of the cross was the reality of the sinless One becoming the sin-bearer. "He [God] made Him who knew no sin [Christ] to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

The penalty for our sin is death, or eternal separation from the Holy God. God could not simply ignore the penalty or He would sacrifice His perfect justice and holiness. But to inflict the penalty

on everyone would violate His great love and mercy. Through the cross, God can be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

I often use the following illustration to explain this. Suppose you were arrested for driving 100 miles per hour in a 30 mile per hour zone. You were clearly guilty. They took you before the judge who said, "This is a serious offense. You could have killed someone. The penalty is a \$10,000 fine or a year in jail." You don't have the money, so it looks like you're headed for jail.

But let's assume that the judge was your father and that he loved you. If he simply dropped the charges, he would be an unjust judge. You committed a serious offense and he must uphold the law. How can your father be both loving and just? The answer is, he could write out a check for \$10,000 and offer it to you to pay your fine. If you accept that check, the law would be upheld and you would go free, although at great expense to your father.

Do you deserve to go free? No, you deserve judgment. Is there anything in you that merits your father's kind treatment? Maybe you've always been a good boy and this is the first offense. If your father is acting on any merit on your part, then the analogy breaks down, because God did not send His Son to die for us because we are pretty good people. Even the best of us from a human perspective were sinful rebels from God's holy perspective. In sending Jesus Christ to die for our sins, God was acting totally out of His mercy and not at all because of our merit.

To go back to the illustration, what should the young man do? He can say, "I don't need your gift; I'll pay for it myself." Okay, he goes to jail! He could say, "I'll accept your offer, but I'll pay you back." But let's assume that the debt was not \$10,000 but \$10 trillion. There is no human way he could ever come close to repaying the debt. The only other option (and the proper one) is to say, "I don't deserve your kindness, but I accept it. Thank you!" At that point, the law is upheld and so is the father's love. The young man goes free because of his father's undeserved favor.

That's what God did for us at the cross of Jesus Christ. He paid the penalty we deserve. If we accept His gift of eternal life, we go free at His expense. God's justice and mercy both shine forth.

You would think that every person would be quick to embrace the cross of Christ. But the Bible shows that while many receive Christ and find mercy, many others reject God's offer because it offends their pride. They don't want to admit that they are sinners deserving God's wrath. They don't want to admit that they can do nothing to atone for their own sins. So the cross becomes a stumbling block to them. And, it leads to division between them and those who accept God's mercy, even to the dividing of close family members:

- C. The consequence of that fire is division, even among family members (12:51-53).

Jesus states that He did not come to grant peace on earth, but rather, division. The prevailing Jewish idea of that time was that Messiah would defeat Israel's enemies and usher in an age of peace (Geldenhuis, pp. 366-367). The angels declared at His birth, "peace on earth" (2:14) and Jesus Himself often extended peace to individuals (7:50; 8:48; 10:5-6).

But Jesus here clarifies matters so that the disciples are not surprised by the growing opposition. God's peace is extended only to those who respond favorably to His offer of forgiveness in Christ. Those who refuse God's offer of peace remain His enemies (Rom. 8:7). Those who are not for Jesus are against Him (11:23). The offer of the gospel necessarily divides people into two opposing camps. There is no neutral ground.

Jesus uses an illustration (from Micah 7:6) to show that the divisions caused by the gospel go deep, even to the separation of close family members. The fact that Jesus does not apologize for this shows His exalted position. Because He is the eternal Son of God, we *must* follow Him, even if it leads to family division, because He is so much more worthy of our allegiance than even the closest of earthly ties.

Of course, we should always strive for harmonious relationships in the family and we should never do anything personally offensive to cause a rift. We should love and honor family members. We should be kind and gracious, even if family members are offensive toward us. But, if family members are offended by the

gospel we believe, then so be it. We must be prepared to bear such hostility and to stand graciously but firmly for the gospel.

Many in our day are calling for unity among all Christians. Properly understood, unity is a biblical virtue. The Promise Keepers movement urges us to drop all denominational distinctions, even between Protestants and Catholics. There is going to be a large Christian unity rally next year at the ballpark in Phoenix, sponsored by both the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. Several families have left our church because I do not promote the unity services held here in Flagstaff. Many cite John 13 to say, "Jesus said that the world would know that we are Christians by our love, not by our doctrinal purity."

Of course we should be kind and loving toward all people. While we may debate minor doctrinal issues, we should not question someone's salvation because he differs with us on such matters. Some issues are serious enough that we may need to work separately, even though we are fellow believers. But, if we set aside the core truths of the gospel for the sake of unity, at that point we are no longer talking about *Christian* unity, because we have given up the essence of what it means to be a true Christian.

Let me clarify this concerning Catholicism, since there is such a strong movement toward unity with Rome. While there may be individual Catholics who trust in Christ alone for salvation and thus are truly saved, such Catholics are not in submission to their church. The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is that salvation is a process that includes Gods' grace through Christ plus our faith *plus our works*. This is precisely the error that the apostle Paul pronounced anathema on in Galatians 1:6-9. This is not the only serious error in Roman Catholicism, but it is the chief error. As long as the Catholic Church teaches another way of salvation than by grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone, we cannot join with them in Christian unity because they are not Christian.

If we proclaim a message that everyone loves, we can be sure that we are *not* proclaiming the gospel. The gospel confronts sinners with their rebellious hearts before God, and the fact is, many sinners take offense at that. The gospel humbles human pride, because it plainly declares that no amount of human goodness can reconcile us to God. The gospel shows people that they cannot do

anything to help God out with their own salvation. The gospel hits even the most moral people with their own rottenness before the holy God and their own helplessness in saving themselves from His righteous judgment. The gospel proclaims, "You must repent of your sins and receive the imputed righteousness of the Savior as your only hope for heaven."

As in Jesus' day, so in ours: It is the religious people, who take great pride in their own righteousness, who are the most offended by the gospel. It is those who devise a system of human works mixed in with God's grace who take offense at the cross. To proclaim that we are one with those who pollute the grace of God with human works is to deny the gospel, which is that we are saved by grace through faith apart from any human works. It is to proclaim unity where none exists.

Charles Spurgeon was accused of being divisive because he pulled out of the Baptist Union, which was tolerating liberals who denied fundamental biblical truth. He countered, "where there can be no real spiritual communion there should be no pretense of fellowship. Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin" (*The Sword and the Trowel*, November, 1887).

Our Savior clearly taught that if we proclaim and hold to the true gospel, we must be prepared for division, even among our family members. As J. C. Ryle (p. 98) pointed out, "It is not the Gospel which is to blame [for such divisions], but the corrupt heart of man." But we must stand with our Lord, even when it results in such painful divisions.

Luke goes on to cite Jesus' words to the multitude, where He chides them for being able to discern the weather, but not the times. The Messiah was in their midst, but they were missing Him! Then He gives an illustration showing that if we are quick to settle an unfavorable lawsuit against us, we had better be quick to settle with God before we come before His bar of judgment. Thus the point is:

2. We had better be quick to get on Jesus' side (12:54-59).

The link between 12:49-53 and this section is that of the coming judgment and the crisis of decision that Jesus' message precipitates. This section falls into two smaller sections:

- A. If we analyze the weather and order our lives by it, we should analyze the times and order our lives accordingly (12:54-56).

In Israel, a cloud from the west came from the Mediterranean Sea and thus brought rain. A south wind came in off the Sinai desert and thus meant a hot day. Jesus then calls them hypocrites because they are able to discern the weather, but they fail to discern the significance of Jesus' presence in their midst. Geldenhuis (p. 368) explains, "On account of their unbelief and spiritual blindness they do not see the cloud of grace and blessings which appears with Him to all who believe in Him, nor do they observe the glowing heat of the judgment which He brings for those who are disobedient."

The point is, we hear a weather forecast and plan our day accordingly. If we hear that the Son of God has come, bringing salvation to all who believe, but judgment to all who ignore the message, should we not respond by immediately embracing Him? The second section underscores the need to get on Jesus' side quickly, before it is too late:

- B. If we are quick to settle an unfavorable case against us in civil matters, how much more quickly should we settle God's case against us before it is too late (12:57-59).

Jesus asks a rhetorical question and then illustrates His point. When Jesus asks the crowd, "Why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right?" He is not implying that unbelievers can, of their own free will and intelligence, decide to follow Him. Jesus taught (10:22) that "no one knows who the Son is except the Father and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Jesus is not contradicting Himself here. Salvation depends on God's sovereign will, not on man's darkened human will or intelligence. What Jesus means here is, "You don't have to blindly follow the Pharisees on spiritual matters." He is urging them to consider His claims for themselves.

Then He uses an illustration. The assumption is that your opponent has a good case against you so that if it reaches the judge, you're going to get thrown into prison and you never will get out. The Roman Catholics use this illustration to argue for Purga-

tory, where a sinner can pay off his sins. But that only shows how hard pressed they are to come up with support for such an unbiblical concept! Jesus' point is simple: If you know that someone has a case against you, settle up before it is too late.

From the context we know that Jesus wants us to apply this spiritually. God has a case against every sinner. We owe Him for our debt of sin. Jesus' death on the cross is the only acceptable settlement. If we discerned the times, we would know that now is the day of salvation. God is offering to settle in full His claim with any sinner who will trust in Jesus Christ. But if we do not settle, there will be no escape on the day of judgment. We will never get out of hell because our debt is infinite since it is against an infinitely holy God. The person who discerns the true situation will be quick to get on Jesus' side.

### Conclusion

During a training session for soldiers who were about to make their first parachute jump, the sergeant explained how to open the reserve chute if the main chute didn't open. A private nervously raised his hand and asked, "Sergeant, if my main chute doesn't open, how long do I have to pull my reserve?"

The sergeant looked directly into the young private's eyes and replied earnestly, "The rest of your life, soldier. The rest of your life." (In *Reader's Digest*, February, 1982.)

If you have not trusted in Christ as your only hope for forgiveness on the day of judgment, you are like that soldier plunging toward earth. Either you accept Jesus as your sin bearer and you are reconciled to God; or, you will come into God's court of justice and pay your own debt, which is eternal separation from Him. How long do you have to get on Jesus' side? The answer is, the rest of your life! Jesus has drawn the line. Will you trust Him now before it is too late?

## Discussion Questions

1. Why is the theme of judgment a necessary part of the gospel?
2. Which doctrines are so essential to the faith that we *must* divide when others deny these doctrines?
3. Why is the message of the cross offensive to sinners? What is the difference between people being offended at the message versus the messenger?
4. Where is the balance between being urgent about the gospel and giving people the necessary time to respond?