

Jesus' Saves and Then Division, Division, Division

(Luke 12:49-53)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. This is one of those Scripture texts that is hard to preach on. As one commentator described it: *"It is not a pretty picture. Human beings would like...constant peace among men. But it will never be so. It is a grim picture which Jesus gives us (Buls, Series C Luke-John Sundays after Pentecost, 41)."* A particular word is highlighted in our Gospel this morning and might easily be construed as that which paints this section of Jesus' teaching as down-right depressing: "division." Jesus says three times in this short pericope:

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

Verse 52: *"For from now on in one house there will be five **divided**..."*

Verse 53: *"They will be **divided**, father against son and son against father...[etc]."*

There is an immediate need to clarify what our Lord Jesus is *not* saying. He is *not* saying that His *purpose* for coming was in *any* way to *harm* any person. *"Hence Jn. 12:47: 'I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.' That Jesus comes to bring about the ruin of any man is a thought which is wholly foreign to the New Testament (Barth, Church Dogmatics III.2, 60)."* Though it must be said that our Lord did indeed come to destroy something (but not any person):

1st John 3:8b: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil."

To destroy the works of your arch-enemy...*not* you! Our Lord was and is teaching that upon accomplishing His saving work, there would be "a temporary though necessary transition (ibid, 60)" in the world that would consist in people being divided. The word itself is straightforward and simple: it means what it says. As a result of the saving work of Jesus, people come down on one of two sides: people are either for Christ or against Christ, period. Some see and others are blind; some are lost, some are found; some follow Him, others reject Him. And this divide will be evident even within families who otherwise share the most important things in life, but ironically will not always share what is most important.

In Matthew's parallel account, the Lord says that He came to bring a sword (Matt 10:34). Think about it: if a sharp sword does its job, then division is the inevitable result. Jesus was describing how people would respond to Him. And while it is politically correct to avoid religious division, such universalism is in itself proof that what Jesus prophesied has happened and is happening.

Saint Paul was straight-forward about the necessity of what happens -- even within the visible church -- in the wake of the saving work of Jesus:

1st Corinthians 11:18-19: ¹⁸...I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized."

Division is permitted by God so that we would have real discernment so that we would be kept protected from false teaching. In today's culture, "Christianity" is being reduced to a universal ethic of [quote] "love" [unquote]; so that contemporary Christianity is nothing but a religious-political movement for equal rights; molding "God" into whatever you want along the way. In this mindset Scripture is no longer authoritative; and the risen Christ no longer relevant. But is a powerless and bankrupt "Christianity" that has denied the faith.

But let me get back to what Jesus is *not* saying. The Lord permits division, but not *for* the provocation of quarrels and strife, nor is He telling us His people to take up arms and be hostile towards those who do not believe. It is alarming to consider what occurs when the Christian faith merges with American politics. The result (among other things) is to develop an "us vs. them" mentality and to promote the demonization of those who believe differently. This was *not* what our Lord was promoting. At the same time, it is evident that this is what people (even Christians) like to do in their sin.

Test yourself: What does thinking about ISIS stir up in you? I am not saying that as intelligent citizens we should not address the threat as thoroughly as possible. We should, but what does it do to your heart? When we hear about the violence -- even as it includes heinous attacks against Christians and even ordained priests -- we are tempted to return evil for evil. We are tempted to hatred. The Christian, however, is to have but one core response: "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matt 5:44).*" But is this the response of our sinful flesh? Of course not and this leads me to what is really important to know from our Gospel this morning.

What really causes the division is not the simple matter of interpretation or the cultural circumstances promoting quarrels and strife, but division comes by virtue of what Basil the Great called in application to our text, “the malice of sin (Just, ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III: Luke*, 217).” The sinner hates the Gospel. This is the natural, real human response to the Gospel, because when one hears of what Christ had to do *for their sin* then the Gospel becomes offensive, a stumbling block, and an assault upon who and what we are.

Jesus was coming to the end of His ministry when He spoke these words. His murder on the cross was getting close. He knew it. Our Savior said, *“⁴⁹I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”*

He said that He was in great distress, deep distress, He was terribly afflicted and troubled; feeling pent up with dread and horrible anxiety towards what He was about to go through. He characterized it as “fire” and as a “baptism”. For us the fire would be purifying, but for Him it would take his life; it was a baptism because He would be covered by His own blood on the cross. And why all this? Because it was the only way to deal with our sin. And this is the offensive part.

“How dare anyone – including God – speak such a pronouncement on me! I know I make mistakes (like anyone else), but to say that I needed Jesus to be more than a revolutionary or inspirational leader like Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King so that I could be saved from sin is atrocious! To say that I was damned in my sin; to say that I was cursed in my rebellion against God makes me insist that this so-called “Gospel” is not for me. Besides, all that this radical religious teaching does is cause unrest. Therefore I say it is not true precisely because it is so destructive, not only upon my own psyche, but upon our society!” And so what Christ prophesied still happens: division!

Luther said that “[t]his bothers us so much we often think, according to the flesh, that it would have been better if the teaching of godliness had never been circulated and peace had been preserved than that the public peace should be disturbed as it has been since it was made public...Once this fire has been kindled, great upheavals immediately arise (Luther’s Works, American Edition Vol. 26, 452).”

But this is the view dear Christian of only the side against the Gospel. For you who are being saved, there is a much greater reality of what is going on. The fire and baptism that Jesus spoke of were not spoken through lips of resentment or judgment, but through lips of love. Jesus saw your need. He didn’t go into a state of denial or rationalization. There was a real need because we were dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1) and He may have shuddered, but He

did not shrink and since He entered into this fire and baptism, you have forgiveness of your sins and eternal life!

“The fire of God’s wrath laid on Jesus [led] to his death and [destroyed] the power of sin and hell. This fire [was] first laid on Jesus when he [entered] the waters of his baptism by John. From his baptism, Jesus [stood] under the Father’s wrath and [continued] to stand under the Father’s wrath until that wrath [was] satiated in his crucifixion. With every sickness Jesus heals, every sin he forgives, every dead person he raises, Jesus is both releasing creation from its bondage and absorbing into his body all sickness, sin, and death (Just, Luke 9:51-24:53, 522).”

Because you were so loved, so infinitely valued, the very Son of God entered the fire for your sin cast on Him and the baptism of His blood which covered it...that was how much God was willing to do to save you, resulting in the good side of division. You’ve been baptized into Jesus Christ and you constantly receive Him into your mouth and into your body in Holy Communion so that the Word lives within you. And it really is vital that He rose, because it means that not even death can defeat the power of His fire and baptism for you! Hear this Christian: it means that His fire and baptism has crushed even the fear of death! And in love, He keeps you living in the holy divide: *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).”*

And so the division continues even within yourself. You daily rise and confess your sins and once again you experience the division. You turn away from the old man and you rise again in the new. And if anyone is in Christ, the old is gone and the new has come (2 Cor 5:17)! Yes, Jesus has brought division. Thank God. It means we belong to Him and if we belong to Him then even if the rest of the world is falling apart we will be safe on the side of God (Ps 91:7). And Jesus said, *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world (John 16:33).”*

Just don’t keep this liberation to yourself dear Christian. Share it. Share it with your family. Share it with your neighbors and co-workers. Share it. Do not be afraid of the division. Use it as an opportunity to pray. Use it as an opportunity to serve while showing the radical love of Christ. Even if your own family rejects you, God has promised never to forsake you (Heb 13:5). But how liberating it is to be divided by Christ and to be found in Christ. We are released from the game of reciprocal negotiation. Our new ethic is not to love people in accordance with what they deserve or what they would do to us, but in accordance with the Gospel: that Jesus came into the world to save sinners...and if this is how He loved you, then love, not some, but all, regardless of what side of the divide they’re on.