

Why did Jesus come?

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is from Luke's Gospel, chapter 12, verses 49 to 59. I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled, because I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed.

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.

From now on, there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two, and two against three.

They will be divided, father against son, and son against father.

Mother against daughter, and daughter against mother. Mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

[1 : 25] He said to the crowd, When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, It is going to rain, and it does.

And when the south wind blows, you say, It's going to be hot, and it is. Hypocrites, Hypocrites, You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky.

How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?

As you're going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled on the way.

Or your adversary may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison.

[2 : 43] I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. Amen. Folks, what do you imagine is going to be the result when the gospel is proclaimed?

When we as individuals tell people about our faith, what is it that you think will happen as we do that? When we as a church proclaim the gospel in this valley, what will be the result?

When people through history went to new places, to new nations, to share good news about Jesus, what happened when they did that? What happens when people still boldly go and do that today across the world?

I wonder what you imagine the result will be. I suspect, I suspect for many of us, we think, when we consider this question, we think of things like Jesus declaring in the Nazareth synagogue, He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Or we think of the angels announcing Jesus' birth to the shepherds on earth peace to those on whom God's favour rests.

[4 : 02] We think of these kinds of declarations and we expect, we assume, that the proclamation of good news will bring peace and joy, that there'll be a kind of swooping acceptance and a great celebration across the board.

And then we come to a passage like this one. And it pulls us up short, doesn't it? We see Jesus saying, verse 51, do you think I came to bring peace on earth?

No, I tell you, but division. Leon Morris rightly says that, that to the question of whether Jesus came to bring peace, most of us would unhesitatingly reply, yes, Jesus came to bring peace.

Yes, but Jesus, no, is emphatic. This passage seems like a discordant note in the midst of the symphony.

It just doesn't seem to fit with our expectations. And I think this passage is meant to be shockingly unexpected, that it should catch our attention like that bright light that's turned on just as we're stirring from sleep as the light pains our eyes.

[5 : 08] There's something, there's something painful and jarring in these verses. And yet, yet doesn't this accord exactly with our experience?

If we look honestly down through history, don't we see that whilst the spread of Christianity has brought peace, yet it has also brought division? And when we consider the occasions when we've shared our own faith, I imagine most of us can point to times when the result of that has not been peace, but rather has been division, when friendships have been damaged or lost completely, times when even families are fractured by the reality of Jesus' message.

And as well as the times we can point to when we've shared our faith and that has been the result, I suspect there are also countless times where we have not shared our faith for fear that this kind of division might be the result.

But that's another issue. Why does this happen? Why does Jesus say he's come to bring division? Why do we see these kind of results?

What produces that division? We'll come back up to verse 49. Jesus says here, he has come to bring fire on the earth. Now there have been a few attempts to see this fire as representing the Holy Spirit.

[6 : 27] You know, Acts chapter 2 verse 3, the Holy Spirit comes down as fire on the disciples. But that really doesn't seem to fit with what's happening here. Honestly, I think interpreting this as the Holy Spirit coming is an attempt to avoid the hard reality of what Jesus says here.

Because the idea here of this fire coming on the earth, the idea here is of judgment. Numerous times through the Old Testament, especially through the prophetic books, numerous times fire is a picture of God's judgment on the earth.

Many of you were around for our studies in the book of Amos a year or two back. And maybe you remember the refrain of the judgments on the nations in the first two chapters of the book of Amos. For three sins of the nation, even for four, I will not relent. I will send fire. God uses fire as a picture of his judgment.

And so when Jesus says here in Luke 12 that he has come to bring fire, he's saying that part of his mission on earth is to bring judgment. And if the idea of Jesus raining fire upon the earth is an alarming one, well, it should be.

[7 : 41] It's supposed to be. This is the warning of God's word. Jesus didn't come in order to tell you everything is fine. Jesus didn't come and say, it's fine as it is, just keep enjoying what you're doing.

No, Jesus came to announce the judgment of God upon the wickedness of sinful humanity. Now, why does that announcement bring division?

Well, I think it's because we don't like to be told this, do we? We don't like to be called sinners. We don't like to hear that the things that we enjoy doing are offensive to God.

We don't want to believe that God cares about our subtle thieving as we try to do the minimum we can get away with at work. We don't want to believe that God cares about who we sleep with.

We don't like to think that God says our anger at our families is unrighteous and is dishonouring to him and must stop. We don't like to hear that our covetousness is offensive, that even the inner thoughts of our hearts and minds are both known to God and repugnant to him.

[8 : 50] We shy away from reading through God's law because it shows us how far we fall short. We don't want to hear that our failure to love our neighbours is sin.

We don't want to think that we are not the ultimate authority in our lives, but rather our Creator demands that role. We do not want to believe in sin as a category.

But Jesus came and showed people that they were sinners. Jesus came and told us that we are sinners.

Jesus shows us that we are far worse sinners than we ever realised. He came with this message of judgement, declaring that there will be awful consequences for our sin, and we need to hear that message of judgement for ourselves.

We need to hear that there are things which rightly make God angry, things which he will punish. Folks, it does us good to be reminded of that.

[9 : 55] We need to hear that message for ourselves, and we also need to recognise Jesus' warning to his disciples in this passage. We need to recognise, we need to accept that when we tell others this message, this will not be popular.

It will often not be well received. We don't like to be told that we are sinners, and nor does anyone else. Now, this is not an excuse to be rude.

This is not an excuse to be deliberately offensive. This is not an excuse to seek to cause division. But Jesus tells us here that we should not be surprised when division is the result.

See, Jesus has been laying out this big challenge. Jesus has been showing, over the course of the last 12 chapters of his Gospel, he's been showing what it looks like to follow him.

What does journeying with Jesus look like? Well, think back to where we started this series. Back to chapter 9, verse 23. Jesus said, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

[11:09] See, what Jesus is offering, what Jesus here sets out, this isn't easy, is it? Deny yourself and take up your cross. Leon Morris says, when people don't rise to this challenge of taking up your cross, when people don't rise to this challenge, they not uncommonly become critical of those who do.

See, to those who reject paths of righteousness, there's something offensive about those who walk in such paths. And I suggest that a significant part of that offence is often because they know at some level the sinfulness of their sin, that they know they are not as they should be.

Now, folks, of course, if you are priggish and arrogant in your so-called righteousness, then people will be understandably put off and offended.

And indeed, the sort of superiority that boasts in your good behaviour, that is no true righteousness at all. Indeed, it is hypocrisy which itself will be subject to judgment.

And yet, even if we are humble, even if we celebrate our saviour and not ourselves, even if we're honest about our own temptation and sin, even still there will be plenty of people who are very much offended by the very idea of sin, offended by the contrast between our desire to honour our Christ and our creator with our lives and their focus upon themselves.

[12:56] So then, so faced with the prospect of division, what do we do? What do we do about it? Well, it's tempting, isn't it? It's tempting to withdraw, to avoid the division by pretending it isn't there, to do whatever we can just to keep the peace.

Harold Songer, commenting on James 3, verse 18, he says that the righteous do not merely keep the peace, which sometimes, indeed I would say often, means failing to confront problems that should be addressed.

No, the righteous make peace, which might mean temporarily disrupting a community in order to deal with root problems so that genuine peace may ensue.

Folks, I think we're tempted to seek peace at all costs, but the Bible doesn't give us that option, does it? Romans, chapter 12, verse 18, If it's possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Seeking peace. Seeking peace cannot be at all costs. There's this false peace where nothing at all is ever challenged.

[14:19] The sort of apparent peace that's found in an abusive household where people are cowed into submission. That sort of quasi-peace, that sort of feigned quietness, where if you're willing to compromise on the truth, you can have what seems to be peace.

That seeming peace where we smile and we nod and we pretend that there's no issue, where we choose not to engage. But that is not true peace. Now, yes, wisdom might sometimes dictate that in particular circumstances we keep quiet.

Maybe the time, the medium, the venue, maybe it's all wrong. But I suspect we act as though that were the case far more than we should. We tell ourselves the reason we're not speaking up is because the time is wrong.

But this is not the time, not the place. We tell ourselves that, but the reality is we are scared of division. Because, folks, this apparent peace is not true peace.

There is no true peace where people continue at enmity with God. See, peace is undoubtedly the result of the gospel where the gospel is believed and received.

[15:44] Peace with God, first and foremost, and flowing out of that peace, peace with others. True peace is possible. But that true peace doesn't come where, where Israel puts it, people are hardened, impenitent, and determined to have their sins.

When people refuse to repent and instead cling ever more tightly to their wrongdoing, then this very message of peace becomes a cause of division.

And so what do we say? Well, we're constrained to say, aren't we? We are obliged to say, boldly and unashamedly, that God sits in judgment over the earth.

I have come to bring fire on the earth. We're obliged to say that there are human behaviors that are offensive to him and that will provoke the fire of his anger to be kindled on the earth.

Jesus says that's why he came. We're obliged to say these things, obliged to defend the very category of sin, the very idea of something that is offensive to almighty God.

[16 : 55] We have to defend the category, and then too, we have to be willing to be more specific, don't we? To say of a government policy, this is wickedness. To say it is wrong to legalize the murder of unborn children.

It is wrong to promote death and call it end-of-life care. Did you know euthanasia, the you prefix, it means good, and thanasia, death, good death.

There is no such thing. What a lie that is. Do we not need to be willing to stand up and say that? To say aloud, it's unequivocally wrong when children go without food.

Yes, we might have discussions about how the problem is best addressed, but let's at least agree it is wrong for children to go hungry. When governments and institutions, when they systematize oppression of minorities and set up unfair structures and policies, we speak up and say, this, this specific thing is not right.

Where those who are leading our nation forge a path of wickedness and lead many astray in their wake, we have to be willing to stand firm and say, this is wrong. We have to do that at a national level and also, also do we not hear, do we not hear, see that we have to be willing to be specific with individuals, with our friends and with our family.

[18 : 27] To say, this thing which you are doing is wrong. It is offensive to God and it will lead you to hell. Why do we say that?

It seems so uncomfortable. It seems so unpleasant. Our society tells us that is a rude and unloving thing to say. And saying it will probably result in division.

Jesus tells us that here. Why do it? Well, because that is the path to true peace instead of feigned peace.

Why? Because this is what love looks like. Maybe, maybe your friend is enjoying the experience of driving at 100 miles an hour and maybe he doesn't want you to tell him to stop doing that.

But if the fact that he doesn't want you to tell him to stop means you aren't going to warn him that there's a landslide ahead and he's going to crash, how can you call yourself his friend? Love warns.

[19 : 29] So will you warn those who you love? Will you warn people who are on a far more dangerous path than in a car headed for a landslide?

Will you warn them about their specific sins and call them to repent of them? And more generally, more fundamentally, will you warn them that they are at odds with their creator? Will you warn them that their failure to put God first in their lives, to give him the honour due his name, to seek, to walk in his ways, will you warn them that their neglect of him is wrong?

Will you show those who consider themselves to be good people that they can never be good enough for the God whose standard is perfection? Will you point out to them that even if they dismiss their sins as minor, that we still, we none of us would want our thoughts and our words on display to those around us and yet they are already known to our creator?

And so, so to the members of Covenant Church, I say, will you warn your unbelieving spouses? Will you continue to warn them time after time after time because you love them too much to stop?

To parents in our church, will you warn your children? Will you warn the ones who are growing up at home and will you warn the ones who left home long ago? Will you warn them that Jesus came to bring fire on the earth?

[21 : 00] Will you warn your brothers and your sisters and your parents and your friends and your neighbours? Do you love them enough to warn them? And maybe, maybe division will come when you offer this warning.

Maybe verse 53 will be your experience and that will be awful. Maybe the division will be incredibly painful for you. But folks, it is not the gospel that causes strife and division.

It isn't. It is the corruption of the human heart. Why is there division? Well, because we, as a race, have turned away from our Creator.

The divisions between nations, the divisions between friends, divisions, even within families. These divisions are all but the overflow of the true division between the Creator and His creation.

Ryle says, it's not God's glorious remedy that's at fault, but the diseased nature of Adam's race, which, like a self-willed child, refuses the medicine provided for its cure.

[22 : 13] Love warns. Love warns, even if it fears the warning will not be heard, even if it fears that the warning itself will bring division, love warns again and again and again.

Division may be the result of that warning, but folks, division doesn't have to be the result of that warning, because as we lovingly warn, we also offer the hope of true peace, of true unity.

Folks, love warns and love proclaims the gospel message. Love declares that however far from God you have driven at breakneck speed, if you have breath in your body, it is not too late.

And maybe that's a message that some of you listening this morning need to hear. Certainly, for sure, it needs to be part of the message that we proclaim to others. How is this true?

How is there hope in the face of judgment? How is there hope of peace? Well, consider verse 50. Jesus says, I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed.

[23 : 29] Folks, the word baptism here, it's an accurate translation, but it's really not a very helpful one, because in English, baptism refers to a religious ceremony, doesn't it? But the Greek word behind it has a much broader meaning, dipping, dunking, purifying, washing.

And clearly, it's not to a religious ritual that Jesus is referring here. He's already been baptised in the River Jordan, and he's not going to be baptised again in that sense. So all of the academics who comment on these passages, they're agreed, and that the idea of baptism here is used for something like being overwhelmed by catastrophe.

There's maybe echoes of Psalm 69 that begins, Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths where there is no foothold.

I have come into the deep waters, and the floods engulf me. It's that kind of baptism, of being overwhelmed, engulfed, entrapped, flooded, that Jesus is talking about here.

Folks, Jesus knows what is coming for him. Back in chapter 9, he resolutely set out for Jerusalem, knowing the death that awaited him there. Here he says he's constrained until this catastrophe has arrived.

[24 : 52] He knows he is going to be utterly overcome, totally engulfed, overwhelmed by this catastrophe. He will be handed over to sinful men. He will be beaten and punished and crucified.

Jesus knows what will come. And that's why there's a message of love, a message of hope, a message of true peace, even in the midst of this message of judgment that brings division.

Because Jesus knew that he would pay the price. Jesus knew that that fire falling on the earth would fall on him. Jesus knew that he would drink the poisonous cup of God's wrath so that we wouldn't have to.

Folks, you listening to me today, you do not have to be at enmity with God and neither do those whom you love. Call out to him and he will answer.

Trust in the salvation that he offers. Receive forgiveness at his hands and go and sin no more.

Folks, it is at once profoundly simple and utterly life-changing.

[25 : 58] For those of us who trust in Jesus, well, that fire that is coming on the earth, it holds no fear. There's no threat because our sins are taken away.

We have been justified. We need not fear judgment. We have this sure and certain hope. It's our experience and you can get in on it too.

I pray that you do. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for loving us enough to warn us of the coming judgment and to be realistic with us about the results that we should expect when we do likewise.

Lord, help us to love enough to speak. Help us to risk division and pain for the sake of true peace, for the sake of drawing people to know and to love you.

Lord Jesus, for those of us who perhaps even now are convicted, are aware of our lack of boldness.

[27 : 23] Lord, forgive us for that, we ask, and change us, transform us, for those of us who, who if we're honest, know that we are not at peace with God.

Lord, continue to speak. bring that true conviction from your spirit. Show us the true reality of that division.

Show us the seriousness of it. And show us the path of hope, the path of peace, the path that leads through Jesus' precious blood shed on the cross.

Show us the hope of eternity spent with you. And enable us to step out in that faith, to make that commitment to regard you as Lord of our lives, to seek to ascribe to you the honour that is due your name, to recognise your authority in all things, and to accept and rejoice in the forgiveness that you offer to us.

Thank you. Thank you, God, for this hope of true peace with you. Amen.