

Interpreting the Times

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Date: 01 November 2020

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] Luke chapter 12 and we'll start reading at verse 49. Jesus said, I have come to bring fire on the earth and how I wish it were already kindled.

But 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. There 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.

He said to the crowd, when you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, it's going to rain. And it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, it's going to be hot.

And it is. 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?

[1 : 12] 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 into prison.

I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. Amen. This is God's word to us this morning.

In different situations, we see some information.

We see a piece of evidence and we predict what the results will be. We predict what will come next. The car in front has its indicator going. We predict that it's going to turn the corner.

Or for that matter, we see the indicator's been going for the last five minutes and he's just sat there in the lane in front of me. Clearly, he's forgotten. And we act accordingly on the basis of what we see.

[2 : 14] She's not been paying attention in class all year. We can predict the exams are not going to go well. He stayed up till 4am. We predict he will feel tired tomorrow.

Red sky at night. Shepard's delight. Red sky in the morning. Shepard's warning. From the mundane to the more significant. From the short term to the further ahead.

We look at a situation that we're in now and we predict what will come in the future. And the specific example Jesus uses here as he turns to the crowd in verse 54 is the cloud rising in the west that indicates rain is coming.

And then the south wind that predicts heat. Now, obviously, those particular weather predictions, those pertain to his geographical location at the time. But the point that he's making through those examples comes in verse 56.

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?

[3 : 20] Jesus says they can understand and interpret the things around them. But they are missing the more important things. They're penny wise but pound foolish.

They're focusing on the trivialities instead of the weightier matters. Now, I hope. I hope that we want to do better. I hope that we want to be alert to what's going on in a way that this crowd was not.

And since that's what I hope we want, I have three headings this morning. First, interpreting Jesus' times. Second, interpreting our times.

And then responding to the times. So, first up, what is it that Jesus expects the crowd listening to him to interpret? What's the situation that this crowd are in?

Well, the background for them, of course, is the whole scope of Old Testament history. In the background to the situation they're in now, well, you have the fundamental events of the first few

chapters of Genesis, of creation and the fall.

[4 : 29] Then you have God's consistent revelation of his character as he makes covenants with his people, as he reveals the law in order that they might know his will. And as time after time after time he calls his people back to himself, as he calls them to faithful service.

In the background to their current situation, you have the persistent rebellion of the people that ultimately resulted in the exile to Babylon. The persistent rebellion of the people and the persistent covenant faithfulness of God that brought about the return to the land of the promise.

All of these things are, if you like, the bedrock, the foundation stones on which the people should be standing and considering the present situation. These things from the past, these are recorded for them in the pages of Scripture.

They should know their history. And they have the prophecies to consider as well, don't they? Down through the ages, God has told his people what to expect in the future.

He's promised the son of David who would sit on his throne forever. He's promised the suffering servant who would be pierced for their transgressions. He's promised the Messiah who would save them from their sins.

[5 : 46] He's given them this hope of a coming redeemer. All of these things are in the background as they interpret their present times. So what about those present times specifically?

Well, politically, politically they're living under Roman occupation. They've been conquered by this foreign power. They're under Herod's oppressive regime. The glory days of that kingdom of David seems a long time ago.

Religiously? Religiously, they should be able to look around and they should be able to see the arrogance of the high priests. They should be able to see the oppressive regime of the Pharisees who go so far beyond what God requires in some areas, yet neglect the weightier matters.

They should be able to see the damnable hypocrisy of the Pharisees that Jesus himself contends. The people should be able to see that. They should be able to interpret these signs.

They should be able to see the desperate times that they're living in. To see that their circumstances right now do not match up with the hope that they were supposed to have. Those are, if you like, the negatives of their present times.

[7 : 00] But what else do they see in their present? Well, they see a young man teaching with authority, not as the teachers of the law. Mark chapter 1. They see a man who is not only proclaiming, but accomplishing recovery of sight to the blind.

As Jesus said, he was sent to proclaim. They've seen a prophet calling them to a baptism of repentance, declaring that he prepares the way for the one to come.

And now they are seeing a prophet who says the kingdom of God has arrived. It is here. It is now. They see a man who heals the sick.

They see demons being cast out. They see all these things. Can they really not understand what is happening? Aren't they able to discern that this is the definitive crisis point of all of history?

Can't they tell this is the point towards which the promises and prophecies were pointing, that this is the time when they are being fulfilled? Are they really so blind that they cannot see this?

[8 : 03] Are they so blind? Well, yes and no. Here in verse 56, here, Jesus says they don't know how to interpret this present time. But he addresses them first as hypocrites, doesn't he?

On some level, they're incapable of seeing. He says they don't know how. But the real reason why they can't seems actually to be that they don't want to.

There is a hypocrisy here. Folks, if you bury your head in the sand, then you can't see what's going on around you. You are incapable of seeing what is happening.

But nobody else is responsible for your inability to see but you. And that is the situation that these people are in here. They are willfully blind to the reality of their situation.

Why? Well, for some of them, at least, it's because they're invested in the status quo, isn't it?

They're complacent. They're comfortable with the way things are. And so they don't really stop to look and consider what's changing around them.

[9 : 12] Calvin says they're hypocrites because they pretend to be asking. They pretend to be investigating. They pretend to want to interpret the times. They pretend to be watching for a Messiah.

They pretend to ask that which, if it were actually shown to them, they're resolved not to see. They pretend. But if somebody called their bluff and presented them with the evidence, they would not

want to see it.

And that's part of why in other places we see Jesus refusing specious requests for signs. Because he knows that that is a hypocritical request by people who don't want to see at all.

Michael Wilcock is quite blunt in his commentary. He says the signs around these people must have meaning. Just as the clouds from the western sea mean rain and wind from the southern desert means heat, the advent of the carpenter of Nazareth is the most significant happening in all of history.

But the majority of men who can see meanings and connections and relationships in most of the phenomena in the world around them, and all the more so as their civilization becomes more sophisticated and rationalistic, the majority of men are rank hypocrites when they look at Jesus Christ and pretend that they can make nothing of the remarkable facts of his life, death and resurrection.

[10 : 36] Pretend they can make nothing of the remarkable facts of Jesus. I think that's true of plenty of people today. If we're honest, perhaps it's true of some of you listening to me now.

That maybe you tell yourself you need more information. Maybe you protest that the Bible is hard to understand. But in all honesty, the reason why people cannot interpret the signs of Jesus' remarkable life, death and resurrection is that they do not choose to do so.

We have even more of the signs of those times apparent to us than were apparent to them at the moment. Will we not interpret these signs?

Now, secondly, what about our own day? Tom Wright says the church has from early on read this chapter as a warning that each generation must read the signs of the times.

The great movements of people, governments, nations and policies must react accordingly. It's fascinating reading J.C. Ryle's comments as he interprets the signs in his own day a few centuries ago.

[11 : 56] It's fascinating reading the things that are so very similar to our present age and those that are decidedly different as well. The church has engaged in this down through history.

And if we're to bring the truth of God's word to bear on the particular issues of our day, then we have to assess what those issues are, don't we? Now, folks, in what follows, I am certainly not claiming infallibility.

I do not declare thus says the Lord when it comes to my interpretation of the situation in Scotland in 2020. Nevertheless, as I look at the world today, it seems to me that in Scotland and in the Western world more broadly, it seems to me that a dominating characteristic of our age is hubris.

Considering government policies and media portrayals, what we see is a colossal overconfidence in our ability to assess different situations and a massive overreach in what we think we can accomplish.

I think as a society, we believe that we have the answers to every question. Or at least if we don't yet, well, we soon will if we put our minds to it. And we believe we can accomplish whatever we desire if we will only apply ourselves.

[13 : 20] We live in a society marked by hubris. Our government, our government here in Scotland seems to believe that it has the right, it has the ability to determine what is and is not acceptable to think and to say.

It's sufficiently confident in its ability to make that determination that our government is seeking to enact legislation that will make it a criminal offence to contravene that which it deems acceptable. Folks, there is a massive problem, I suggest, actually not only with the presently proposed hate speech legislation, but there is a problem with the very idea of such legislation.

See, maybe it seems all very well when the lines that are being drawn of what is and isn't acceptable are similar to the lines that you might draw yourself.

But as Stephen Neill put it in his blog this week, he says, See, the problem is, who defines what is hateful?

[14 : 46] Well, the Scottish government believes it is qualified to do so. Folks, do we, do I, do we want to support spreading religious hate or racism?

Of course not. Do we denounce any harassment of those who identify as LGBT and do we unequivocally condemn violence against those same people? We certainly do and we must. But when the new proposed hate crime legislation goes ever further than before, with the Justice Minister saying that he intends to criminalise hateful speech, even in one's own home, when we are

policing not only what is said in public, but in what was once the sanctuary of your own home, folks, when we are policing that, something has gone awry.

Surely, when the National Secular Society and the Christian Institute, when they are on the same side of a campaign, when they are both arguing against this proposed legislation, surely the hubris of our nanny state is starting to show.

Our government is massively overconfident of its ability to assess situations and determine what is and is not acceptable to believe.

[16:12] It has an overinflated view of its knowledge. And further, I suggest an inflated view of what it is capable of achieving. An inflated view of what it knows and an inflated view of what it can do.

Folks, what lies behind this legislation? Well, this proposed law is attempting to legislate hatred out of existence. Now, on one level, surely we applaud.

We don't want to see hatred in our society. Of course we don't. But what colossal arrogance this displays. How misguided it is to think that hatred can be brought to an end by laws.

See, hatred doesn't exist out there in the domain subject to legislation. No, hatred fundamentally comes from within. Hatred exists in the human heart.

And the heart will never be changed by legislation. Only one thing can ever change the human heart. Only one thing will bring an end to hatred.

[17:21] Only one thing can reconcile those who stand poles apart from one another. Only one thing. And that is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. A new heart of flesh in the place of a heart of stone.

Our government believes it has the answer to hate. What hubris. Folks, this second point of this sermon.

I think this is probably the sermon point I've most redrafted of any I've ever written. Because there are countless other dimensions that we could reflect on here. Countless other examples of that hubris at play.

Countless other aspects of national life that we could look at and reflect on the signs of our times. As a society.

I think we do collectively believe that we can achieve things we're not capable of achieving. I think we act as though we know things that we are not qualified to know.

[18:24] And there are other ways that we could reflect on these things. But I'm going to leave it there. Better, I think, to address these other aspects of our prevailing worldview as we come to sections of God's Word that respond to those facets than to go around several different things now.

For here and now, let's ask, what is the consequence of this hubris? If we live in a society that is marked by it, well, what does that result in?

I think that arrogance, that pride, that confidence that we can solve every problem and find every answer, I think it means most fundamentally that so many people believe there is no need for God.

We have all the answers. There is no creator, no voice from outside to provide answers, no need for prayer because we can do it ourselves, no need for revelation because we can investigate.

Nobody who can do the things that we cannot do because there are no things that we cannot do.

Well, folks, maybe we should be praying that as these characteristics, as these attitudes seem to become more and more prevalent, more and more extreme, maybe we should be praying that they actually reach the point where the cracks show more and more.

[19:46] Proverbs 16, 18 assures us that pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Let's pray.

Let's pray that the pride and hubris of our society will be exposed, that many will be humbled to recognize the limits of our capabilities, to recognize the reality of a creator and the necessity of external revelation.

So, having considered the interpretation of Jesus' times and the interpretation of our own, the closing verses of this section, I think, invite us to consider how we respond.

Jesus, having called his hearers to interpret this present time, he advises, verse 58, if 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 into prison.

I tell you, you will not get out until you've paid the last penny. Jesus' advice, reach an out-of-court settlement. Now, that may or may not be wise advice for somebody facing an actual lawsuit.

[21 : 03] I'm certainly not offering you legal advice here. And it's not actually a court case that Jesus is worried about either, is it? No, the question is not about disagreements between us, but rather with regard to what you might call a heavenly lawsuit.

The issue isn't how will you be judged on this earth, but how will you be judged by God himself at the end of days? And as Jesus says, well, when you know what the verdict will be, when you know that if the lawsuit proceeds through to the judge's pronouncement, he will declare you guilty, when you know that it will cost you everything, when you know that that's the situation you're in, would you not go to any and all lengths to avoid that result?

So you let the trial run its course when you believe, when you assess that you're going to come out better that way than whatever deal you can make in the meantime. And so Jesus asks, do you not have the wit to realise what's coming?

Can't you look at the circumstances around you and see what you need to do? Can't the crowd listening to him see that God's kingdom has arrived? Can't they see that the Messiah has come and they must, must respond?

Folks, can't you, can't you listening to me see that your life could be demanded from you at any moment? Doesn't a deadly virus running rampant remind you of your mortality?

[22 : 33] Doesn't it remind you that you are not in control? Doesn't it show you that it could be too late at any moment? That you don't know when the judge will pronounce his verdict? So why not come to terms now?

Don't you have the wisdom to look at the world and to see that sin corrupts everything? Can't you see the fallen state of our society? Can't you look at your own life and see, see the inadequacy of all your attempts to do good?

Can't you recognise that your sins are as red as scarlet? Do you really want to be in that situation where you're liable to pay back every last penny? Where you stand beneath a debt that you could never afford?

Now, with every illustration, every analogy, there's a point at which it falls down.

And for this analogy that Jesus uses, I think it falls down at this point here. See, when you reach an out-of-court settlement, you're choosing the comparatively small pain, the lower cost that you can agree to, the limited admission of guilt, the partial payment, you're choosing that over the uncertainty, the unknown of what the verdict might be.

[23 : 51] Because that verdict is unknown in our courts today, because justice is imperfect. Because judges and juries have imperfect information, or are themselves imperfect. And therefore, sometimes sentences are unjust.

The guilty go unpunish, the innocent are wrongly convicted. And so even knowing that you're guilty, well, you might still choose to let the trial run its course, because you know the evidence is insufficient, and you judge that you'll get away with it.

But the analogy falls down, because that's not the situation in what Jesus is advising. See, in the heavenly courtroom, the judge has perfect knowledge. There are no facts unknown to him.

When the judge of all history sits down, there are no imperfections in his process of deliberation. There are no miscarriages of justice. If you are guilty, you are punished.

And you're wound, in God's word, just how unbearable that punishment will be. See, unlike in our courts, there's no doubt what the result will be if you choose this course in God's courtroom.

[24 : 59] The analogy falls down in that way. And wonderfully, it kind of falls down in another way too, because the out-of-court settlement here is far better than any that is ever available in today's legal system.

Yes, the settlement that God is offering you. Yes, you must admit your guilt, but there's no price to be paid whatsoever. The Father's mercy is sufficient to cover all of your debts.

The price is paid once for all upon the cross. And the results of this course of action, of reaching a settlement, the results of this are every bit as certain as the results of waiting for the verdict in the trial.

Because these results, the promise of the settlement that is on offer, this is backed by the ironclad guarantee of God's own promises. There is no doubt whatsoever.

So come to terms with your creator now. So you don't need to worry about whether or not opposing counsel will be willing to compromise.

[26 : 03] You don't need to stress about whether the deal you'll get will be good enough. You don't need to weigh up, well, what might I get out of court against which way do I think the verdict will go?

Because you know ahead of time the results in either case. You know the result of an out-of-court settlement. And you know the result of going to verdict.

Read the times. See what's coming. Take the only logical course. Let's pray.

God, grant us wisdom, we ask. Grant us wisdom to understand the times that we are living in.

Grant us wisdom to see the evidence of history. To reflect on what you have said. To predict what is to come. Grant us wisdom to know what will be the results if we stand condemned before you at the end of time.

[27 : 05] Grant us wisdom to see the times that we are in. And to come to terms now while we may. Lord, grant us that wisdom to understand what you have said and what you call us to do.

Amen.