

Division, Discernment and Decision

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 12, and that's beginning at verse 49 on to the end of the chapter, just taking the whole of the passage there as we find it there. The bulk of Luke's gospel is taken up with Christ's journey to Jerusalem.

It begins at chapter 9, verse 51, and then goes on to chapter 19 and verse 4 thereabouts. So the bulk of the passage, this middle part of Luke's gospel, is taken up with that journey.

And what you find as you read through the gospel is that as Jesus went on in that journey, his tone gets more serious. It's not that he was ever flippant or anything other than serious, but his tone gets more serious in the sense that, as you see in this passage, he's actually dealing with things in a very severe way, and yet that's related to the journey that he's on, which is going to terminate in the cross, of course.

And what you find is that many people then, as now, were misinformed or mistaken about what Christ was about, what he was in the world for, didn't even accept that he'd come into the world in the way that he had.

And so that's why you find him using so many warning images, so many other types of images as well that have a serious intent, as he addresses the people and his disciples as he goes on on this journey.

[1 : 29] So it's Luke's way of binding together these incidents as they happened, but also in a way that shows the whole thing is moving inexorably towards the final stage of the cross itself.

So there are three things. Sometimes you find the divisions actually in the translation, such as the English translation, not very helpful. In this case, they're very helpful, actually, because the three divisions you find there versus 49, first of all, 49 to 53, the ESV here as its heading, not peace, but division.

And then the next one, interpreting the time, and then settle with your accuser. That's certainly in the ESV that I'm using here. And these are very useful because the three points I want to really mention tonight and follow out a little bit are in these, just looking at the division of the passage into these three sections.

Division, discernment, and decision. Versus 49 to 53 talks about division. The next section talks about discernment, discerning the present time or interpreting the present time.

And finally, there's decision, where there's a very important decision mentioned in it. Let's look at these briefly as we see it fitted into the passage and its meaning. What he says here is, I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled.

[2 : 55] I have a baptism to be baptized with. How great is my distress or my burden until it is accomplished? And there are various interpretations of that.

What does he mean here by this fire that he has come to cast on the earth or to begin on earth?

This baptism that he has to be baptized with. I think we need to take both of these together.

Because as he's going on to speak about how the world is divided over Jesus, that fits in with these emphases here on the fire and the baptism.

The fire here really has the, as it has in most of the uses of it in scripture, spiritually, has the meaning of judgment, of God's judgment especially.

And what he's saying is, I've come to cast that fire on the earth. I've come through my work. It's going to bring judgment. And in the judgment that it brings, it's going to divide people either in favor of me or against me.

[3 : 52] And that's in keeping with the Bible's teaching, of course, elsewhere as well. And when he calls it a baptism here, I have a baptism to be baptized with. How great is my distress to us accomplish?

That really also means his death, especially so that the judgment of God and the, the baptism that indicates dying on our baptism, dying to sin and so on for him, this baptism is his death.

And it's amazing how he's actually saying here, how great is my distress or how am I straightened in the old version, words of the AV. How am I straightened?

How am I actually compressed in my soul until it is accomplished? And what you find there is Christ's commitment to his task.

An amazing thing that he knew in advance, of course, what he was in the world for. He knew where his journey was going to end. He knew that this journey was towards inevitably the death that he would die on the cross.

[4 : 57] Yet what he's telling his, his hearers here and what we read here about him is such an amazingly precious truth. And it's this, that the more the Lord went on and the nearer he got to Calvary, the more he himself within himself, and sometimes speaking it out as here, the more he was constrained to go through with that work, the more that he was just burdened to finish what he had come to do.

That itself is such an amazing thing when you think of what it entailed and what the cross really was about and how it was taking God's judgment against sin, against our sin particularly.

And yet the Lord is willingly taking that to himself and saying here, I've got a burden to finish this. I just, I'm concerned. I've got a zeal to see it through. It wasn't something that anyone had inflicted on him.

It was something that he had in his destiny. And from all eternity, this had been set out for him as he well knew. So Christ's commitment to his task, it fits in, in a way with what we saw on the Lord's day regarding the question to the disciples, if they had actually understood what he had done with them in washing their feet and how that meant that they had to follow that example.

Well, here's the Lord saying to us, I am so committed to this work, even though it's going to involve this death, this judgment, this fire. I'm actually burdened.

[6 : 30] Would that it were already kindled. I think he's meaning by that. Would that the cross were here now, because that's what I would go through. And that means following on from that, he's talking then about this division, the dividing line, if you like.

Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. And that's rather strange, because we tend mostly to think about Jesus being in the world and through his work, creating peace and especially peace with God.

And of course, that is a major part of his work and his purpose in the world. He did come to bring peace. He did come to create peace between us and God and between us as human beings.

A peace that's profound, a peace that's deep, a peace that's lasting, a peace that goes on into eternity and will never end. And that's of course true. But what the Lord has here is the way in which the cross, the message of the cross, the gospel, and the witness of God's people to Jesus creates a division.

The word that's used here for division is a word from which we get our English word diametric.

When you find people saying, well, they're diametrically opposed views, or they're diametrically opposed matters.

[8 : 02] So what you find there is extremes. What you find is really that it pulls apart. Well, here is Jesus saying, I have come not to create peace on earth. In this sense, I've come to create division.

Because he knew that his followers would meet as he met himself with intense opposition, with the kind of reaction and response that would cause them much suffering and even persecution and death for some of them as well.

In other words, when we come to accept Christ, that inevitably creates division. Now, he's putting it here very remarkably by applying it to the likes of family situations, father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law, and so on.

And of course, that doesn't mean that inevitably in every household, you're going to have these divisions and that they're going to be very strong and severe divisions. What he says is, in principle, and it sometimes very often is, in fact, within relationships too, that you find this distinct difference, this distinct divide between those who are committed to Jesus and those who are not.

And that's the dividing line he's talking about. That's the division he's come instead of giving peace in every sense, in an absolute sense.

[9 : 34] He's come also because he knows that division is actually going to be inevitable on the part of those who accept him and those who don't. And that goes all the way back to the Garden of

Eden.

It goes all the way back to Genesis 3.15 where you find the Lord actually then addressing the serpent. I will put enmity between your seed and the seed of the woman.

And that enmity continues and will continue to the Day of Judgment because they're diametrically opposed views, diametrically opposed mindsets, and Paul said the same thing out many times.

For example, Romans 8, as you know, the old translation again is the carnal mind. The mind of the flesh is enmity against God, but the mind of the spirit or the spiritual mind is life and peace.

And these are the two sides of the issue diametrically opposed. And you don't have to be a Christian for very long to actually experience and realize the truth of what Jesus is saying.

[10:46] And that's what you find so difficult, really, to follow out in the sense that we know that division is a horrible thing in itself.

None of us likes divisions. None of us likes in any way to be divided from other people. And at the same time, we ought also to have an intense dislike of compromise when it comes to compromise of the truth.

And that's why we face so much opposition today when we actually say, well, we cannot actually accept the teaching of, let's say, some parts of the wider church even, whether it's regarding relationships or other views of other things that you find in the world that sadly people have actually brought in and made part of or tried to make part of the gospel message in the interest of love, in the interest of peace, in the interest of reconciliation, in the interest of equality.

And we're not against any of these things in principle. But when it comes to the gospel, when it comes to the claims of Jesus, we have to be true to himself.

and however much we will and want to put that across lovingly and tactfully and patiently and stress that it's not a hatred of people, it's not a hatred of their persons, but that we want to be true to the truth as it is in Jesus.

[12:17] I have come not to bring peace, but to give rather division, a division that's divided over Christ himself and the truth of God in him.

And of course, that doesn't mean that we don't carefully look at how we present things. And one of the things that we need to bear in mind, especially now that we're actually doing online live streaming, there's a danger in doing that, of course, although it's beneficial.

but unless we explain things carefully, there are groups out there, as you well know, that might just misuse that and bring the church to court or something like that where we're being accused of all kinds of things in presenting the truth.

So we have to be careful and yet adamant that we cannot compromise the standard, the truth that Jesus has given us. That's the first thing that is inevitably division in that sense.

And then he goes on to speak about discernment in verses 54 to 56. And these three passages are really closely tied together because when he's talking here about division and the way that himself is teaching, his teaching, his person, the cross, inevitably makes and creates that division.

[13:39] Then he goes on to speak about the importance of interpreting or discerning the times. And he talks here about the weather, first of all, in the ordinary sense, in the natural sense.

When you see a cloud rising in the west, you can see a shower is coming, so it happens. You see the south wind blowing, which of course in those areas then was, as it is today, they would say there'll be a scorching heat.

And it happens. They're predicting the weather very accurately. And of course, now we have very sophisticated weather forecasting, but in the old days, you would find the old folks saying, well, I don't think it's going to be a good day tomorrow.

There's a very marked circle around the moon, or you could say that the sky is looking very threatening, and it's going to have the effect of bad weather tomorrow.

And they were able very accurately at least to do that. But now with sophisticated weather, we can see days in advance what the weather is going to be like. And you can see the charts with all the various movements of the weather coming towards you and then going away again and so on.

[14:44] And you know, of course, they still get it wrong. Most of us remember the famous Michael Fish incident in 1987, where he said live on the weather forecast, a woman from somewhere down south had contacted him to say that there was a hurricane coming and he said, I want to assure you there isn't.

Of course, he was wrong because the hurricane came and smashed up a lot of stuff down south in England. Well, what Jesus is saying is you can interpret the appearance of the earth and sky. You can do that accurately. You can tell what the outcome will be. You can tell what that means. But you cannot know, you do not know rather, how to interpret the present time. Not discerning God's work and that's especially related to himself. What he was saying, what they were hearing from him, what they were seeing him do, God's work through him and yet they were failing to interpret that aright, to see that aright, to actually work out what it was about. They were refusing to accept what Jesus himself was about and what he was saying. Something much more important, of course, than the weather. Now, when he uses the word hypocrite, that's what I said at the beginning, he's using very strong words here, verse 46, with an exclamation man. [16:04] You hypocrites, you do not know how to interpret the present time. What does he mean by hypocrites there? Well, it means something like concentrating on what's superficial, concentrating not on the most important things, but on other things less important that exist and go on round about them.

And what he's saying is, you don't actually look at the most important thing, which is what I'm saying to you, what I'm doing, what I'm about.

And instead, you're looking at less important things, things that are much more superficial than salvation, than the reason that I'm in the world. And the same pattern, of course, repeated generation after generation, right down to our own day.

You can hear it so regularly on the news and other programs now as well, where forecasting is very much to do with economic things, with political forecasting, all kinds of opinion polls, sports forecasting, so many different areas of life, virtually every area of life.

People try and predict and people try and forecast it, and of course, there's a great industry around that in terms of gambling as well. All of that concentrated into looking at how to interpret things and trying to work out what's going to happen.

[17:34] How much have you heard in public announcements since the lockdown of interpreting the signs of the time spiritually?

How many people are asking, have I got something to do with this? is my life as it should be? And have I contributed to the way that this providence, not that of course many people would look at it as a providence of God, but as Christians we do.

And we have to look at our own lives and look at our own selves and say, did I have something to do along with others? Did we all contribute in some way towards this providence?

God is obviously in some way displeased with us as a people. What are we learning from that? How are we looking at the signs of the time?

Are we still concerned just to look at things superficially, just looking at the surface of things? Are we just saying, well, that's not the first time this has happened in the world, in the history of the world, there have been other pandemics, it'll go its own way, it'll come to an end sometime or other?

[18:45] Well, we have to do that, of course, and look at it positively, but here is Jesus saying, how do you not know how to interpret? Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

And would that our people, our leaders as well in government and in many areas of life that affect us all, were able to just go below the superficial.

I'm not saying that the superficial, as we're calling it, is unimportant. Of course it's important that you look at the economic damage that's been caused by the COVID pandemic and the political turmoil that is caused and the need to get things stabilized and all of that.

Of course that's important, but what's even more important is asking, where is God in this? Where do I look for spiritual teaching and conclusions to draw from this?

And what am I going to make of it in terms of my relationship with the Lord? This is what he was saying to them. You don't know. Why don't you know how to interpret the present time?

[19:51] So he's talking about division. He's then talking about discernment. And then thirdly, in the final part of it, the passage, he's talking about decision. He's really talking about an out-of-court settlement because he's talking here about, or he's asking this question in terms of verse 57.

Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? See, the whole thing just follows on one point from the other. There's the division, then there's the lack of discernment, and now he's just coming to say, why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?

Why are you not actually doing this for yourselves instead of just listening to what others are saying? Because they were following the teaching of many people that said, well, Jesus, he's significant in many ways, but you can't possibly bind up your own life and your salvation in him. So he's now using an illustration and saying, as you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer puts you in prison.

What he's really saying there is, when your case is hopeless, and when you know that your case is hopeless, there's no point in dragging it out and bringing it to court, and then finding that after all, you lose your case, you lose your freedom, you're shut up in prison, you have lost pretty much everything sometimes.

[21 : 21] What he's saying is, reach an out-of-court settlement when your case is hopeless, and actually settle with the judge, with your accuser, before he hands you over to the judge.

So that's the illustration, that's the thing in the ordinary sense. That picture could be, maybe it's something of a financial crisis, in any case it's obviously a hopeless case.

So it's wise to settle before the trial, because the outcome is going to be inevitable. What he's really meaning is, you have to settle with God on the terms that he's setting.

And again, that points, of course, to himself. All of this is about him, and it's about him on his journey to the cross, about the teaching that he's giving on the way, so that they will be prepared, the disciples especially, for that when it comes.

And our own case is hopeless. Our own case, as sinful human beings under God's condemnation, we're not going to win that case. We're not going to be able, we're not able ourselves to pay our way out of God's condemnation.

[22 : 31] That's what the Bible makes clear. And that's what they're really doing here. They're just interpreting it in their own terms, dismissing Jesus, dismissing his claims, and therefore just trying to actually work things through themselves.

What he's saying to them is, your case is actually hopeless. You're going to lose. You'll end up in prison spiritually. You'll be bankrupt. And for us, of course, tonight, we know that our case is hopeless.

But Jesus has paid for it. Jesus has made the provision. Jesus is the provision for it. That's why he's in the world. That's why he's on this journey. That's why he ended this journey on the cross.

That's what the cross is about. And so that's why the Bible, the likes of 2 Timothy, 2 Corinthians, rather, comes to mind. where Paul is dealing in that wonderful chapter 5 of 2 Corinthians with this whole concept of reconciliation, such an important element in understanding the cross of Jesus. It's one of the major doctrines, if you like, attached to the death of Jesus, this reconciliation. What he is, actually, Paul is doing here, if we start at verse 18 and just break into the narrative at that point.

[23 : 55] All this, he says, is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us, he means there the apostles, and that follows into the preaching of the world.

Since then, he gave us the ministry of reconciliation. Literally, it's the ministry of the reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of the reconciliation.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ. God making his appeal through us. That's the gospel. That's preaching the gospel. What is it? It's God's appeal through human agents.

And what does the appeal consist of? It's this. We implore you in behalf of Christ, in Christ's stead, be reconciled to God. On what grounds?

Well, for he's made him to be sinned, who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God. And again, the cross and the death of Jesus stands centrally and four square in the whole of the issue that we're dealing with even in that passage.

[25 : 12] The cross, that itself in its teaching and its insistence on Christ's uniqueness and Christ himself without compromise as the only saviour, causes division inevitably amongst human beings.

And then the cross, in terms of discernment, what is the most important thing to discern? What is the most important thing to forecast? What should we focus more upon than anything else?

It is the spiritual signs of the times, what God is doing, what God has done, what God is claiming in claiming us by the cross of Christ and what's happened there.

And thirdly, the cross in terms of our decision to reach a settlement with God, to be reconciled to God, knowing that Jesus has paid the whole debt for our sin.

We pray God will bless these thoughts on his word. Let's pray. Lord of God, we give thanks that your grace enables us to meet the divisions that your own gospel and the salvation that you give to us and the testimony that you bear within your people as we interact with the world.

[26 : 28] We thank you that your grace is able to uphold us and that you do this for us day by day. We pray, Lord, as we know of that division and know of ourselves as your people to be separated spiritually from those who constantly refuse you and those who insist that they not only go their own way but find some other form of saviorship.

We ask, O Lord, that you would help us nevertheless to remain lovingly and tactfully presenting the gospel on the cross to them. we ask, O Lord, that you would help us to be discerning people, that we may learn from what we see happening in our world, to look to you and to seek to be guided by you, to know of your will for us, to know of your guidance through the scriptures and through the ministry of your Holy Spirit.

We ask, O Lord, that you would deliver us from any sense of being self-sufficient, but grant us, Lord, that we may instead come to be sufficient in yourself.

And we ask, too, that you would enable those that hear the gospel and are yet unsaved to come to settle with you. And as you present yourself to them as both father and judge, Lord, we pray that you would help them to welcome your love as a father and also to respond to your severity as a judge.

And we pray that many even through this time of restriction and lockdown as the gospel continues to be ministered into homes and hearts and minds. And we pray, Lord, that these will be days of many coming to lay down their arms of rebellion and come to settle their case with you and be reconciled to God.

[28 : 19] Receive our thanks, we pray. Hear the prayers of your people and guide us now, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, let's conclude this evening by singing