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Following the Prince of Peace Isn't So Peaceful

August 14, 2022

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TEXT: Luke 12:49-53 (ESV)

"I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, 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 her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Jesus Christ is oftentimes talked about as the great peace-giver and the ultimate peacemaker who sought peace at any cost. After all, in the Bible, he is referred to as the Prince of Peace, and the angels sang of "Peace on Earth" at the time of his birth. And we remember him saying to his disciples, "Peace, I leave with you." And we also see Jesus promoting peace in His Sermon on the Mount when he says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the Sons of God." So naturally, we would think Jesus is all about peace. And so, we're surprised by these words of Jesus in today's text as he talks about his mission of casting fire on the earth. And he tells his disciples that he did not come to give peace on Earth, but division, even families will be split up over him. It's a hard saying and disturbing, and we'd rather skim over it and not have to deal with it. Still, Jesus did say these words, so how can we ignore them?

Today, we're going to attempt to come to grips with a very hard saying of Jesus. First, it's important that we look at the setting around these troubling words. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and he's told his disciples He will be rejected there and suffer and die and rise again. And he's told them also that following him means carrying a cross. In the story right before our reading for the day, Jesus talks to his disciples about how

important it is for them to always be faithful to him and the Gospel while they wait for his return in power at his second coming. He wants them to be like faithful, obedient servants, carrying out the master's work as they wait for his return. Now, in today's passage, he moves on to describe the difficulties involved with doing that. First, he talks about his own mission and what he's facing, as if to say, "Remember, a servant is not above his master. If this happens to me, it'll happen to you." He said, "I came to cast fire on the earth." Fire is a troubling thing – it destroys. We've seen forest fires. We've know that fire refines and purges. We also know that fire is very painful. In Scripture, fire is oftentimes used as a symbol for the judgment of God and the giving of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "When He comes, He'll baptize you with fire and with the Holy Spirit."

Ultimately a judgment is coming when Jesus will judge the living and the dead, right? That's what he's talking about. Jesus then goes on to say very longingly, "Oh, and would that were already killed." As if he's saying, I wish this mission were accomplished, and behind me, and the fire was started already. Then he tells them why: because I have a baptism to be baptized with, Jesus said. He's talking about the cross, where he'll be fully immersed in humanity's sins and die a cruel death, so we can have God's forgiveness in our lives. You see, the world is broken by sin and cannot have a relationship with God until Jesus has completed God's redemptive plan of suffering and dying on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. And we get a glimpse into what's going on into the heart and mind of Jesus as he looks ahead to that suffering that awaited him, when he says, "How great is my distress until it's accomplished!" Jesus knew how difficult this was going to be. Then he looks at his disciples and says to them, "Do you think I've come to give peace on Earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on in one house there will be division over me, within the families." Jesus sees himself here as the great divider of people. He knows there is and there always will be controversy over him. He provokes division among people with his claims about who he is. He's the son of God, the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. And as they struggle over the call to follow him alone for salvation, some believe, some won't. He forces choices to be made in regard to him and his ministry, and that can lead to some division among even the most intimate relationships like the family, as some believe and some won't. To declare loyalty and commitment to him, therefore, can cause painful friction in households. That's what he's saying here. And that is anything but peaceful. Family was especially important in that culture, it was everything: your identity, your security. So this description of father against son, son against father, mother against daughter,

daughter against mother and all the other against – a house divided three against two – sounded very painful to those listeners that day. “If you follow me,” Jesus is saying, “and serve me as your Savior and Lord, your family just might disown you, shun you, cut you out, leave you alone and penniless. There’s a cost to following me. Consider yourself warned.” And it did happen just as Jesus said it would. He did cause great division among households when some family members believed in him and were shunned and disowned by the rest of the family. It still happens even today. According to Messianic Jewish ministries, many Jewish children are ostracized from families and treated as if they no longer exist. Converts from Islam or from certain Asian faiths face a similar isolation and sometimes even the threat of death. If you read *Voice of the Martyrs* magazines, you find all kinds of testimonies about death threats towards Christian converts from their own families, driven from family and villages. They’ll say it’s been a tough life following Jesus, but they’re hanging in there and continuing his work because they’re grateful for what he’s done for us. So they choose to follow him and obey his word.

Anything but peace. It can lead to some unpeaceful experiences, even in our own setting. When Christ takes over one’s life, there are changes that will happen in a person. You become a new creation with new thinking. You have new thinking and new values and priorities and a new way of looking at things. There’s a new obedience. You start seeing situations through the eyes of Jesus asking, “What would Jesus want me to do here?” There’s a different spirit within you. As the Holy Spirit takes over and shapes and molds you and conforms you into the image of Christ. And this kind of change can cause reactions from those who have known you previously. They knew you as a certain kind of person before. Now they see some differences in your thinking and in your behavior, and they’re not sure what to make of that. Sometimes the reaction is positive, but sometimes it’s negative. They feel threatened, maybe even a little judged, and they might even treat you like you’re some sort of a nut or a fanatic. Family and friends might shake their heads and talk about you like “Steve’s got religion. He’s not quite the same since he got this Jesus thing going.” They might think that you don’t have as much in common with them anymore and they might isolate you. Some family members might be puzzled, skeptical, not sure of what to make of you anymore. And there’s a painful feeling of division. And the closer the relationship, the stronger the reactions can be. A spouse might say, “I feel like I’ve lost my husband. He’s not the same man I married. What has this Jesus done to him?” These reactions don’t

necessarily end up with big explosions, but a dividing wall can go up and there's a distance and it's painful.

When there comes a difficult moment in a Christian's life, will you remain faithful servant to your master Jesus? After all, we are still human, and we want approval and acceptance from others around us. And if criticisms and misunderstandings and isolation or ridicule starts coming our way over this relationship with Jesus. What are we going to do? We might react in unhealthy ways. We might feel hurt and angry and self-righteously judge those around us responding "Your loss to get a clue!" and write them off as pagans and isolate ourselves from them. Well, it's pretty hard to let your light shine before others if you're not hanging around with them. You've compromised your mission given to you by Jesus. Or next, we might attempt to keep Jesus in the Gospel to ourselves – hide it under a bushel and go undercover and compromise a bit for the sake of fitting in and keeping the peace. Lighten up on this thing and not be so serious about it. Again, compromise to the mission. Or we might totally give in to the temptation to just return to the former way – tired of feeling isolated, we go back to the old life. Fearful of losing those precious relationships, we cave in and we turn from Jesus, trading in an eternal relationship for more temporal ones.

And we know from the New Testament, that early Christians experienced conflict and division just like that. That's why we read in the New Testament letters warnings about this happening and how to best handle these reactions when they come from nonbelievers in our lives. There's counsel to be found in the letters of the New Testament as to how to faithfully navigate these difficult waters as Christians in relationships with non-Christians. For instance, the Apostle Paul says, "Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think and act honorably towards everyone and treat everyone with honor." And Peter wrote things like,

Don't be surprised at the trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange is happening to you. But rejoice insofar that you are sharing in Christ sufferings. And don't repay evil with evil or reviling for reviling. But on the contrary, bless others for to this you are called. In your hearts, honor Christ, the Lord is holy and always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who has asked you for the reason, for the hope that's within you. Do it with gentleness and respect. Having a good conscience.

And here are some instructions from the writer of Hebrews who congregation was also experiencing this kind of temptation, basically saying, "Christians, hang on to the

gospel. Remember that in Christ that you have a huge family. So stick together for support and encouragement. Don't neglect to gather for worship and support. You need it."

So, Jesus isn't insinuating that he's anti-family when he talks like this to us? No. He invented family in the first place. So why in the world would he ever want to break it up? He's just giving you and me a heads up, a dose of reality that he can provoke division in your life when you follow him as your Lord and Savior and strive to faithfully serve Him and be obedient to Him. It can cause a great disturbance in your most important relationships. Your life will be less than peaceful, and you could be in for some heartache along the way. Forewarned is forearmed, you see. The truth is world peace and perfect peace and all our human relationships will never happen until Jesus comes again in majesty and power. Even though He has won the victory over sin and death and the power of the devil, there is still a battle going on between good and evil, Satan and God, light and darkness. And we will continue to see all kinds of divisions and conflicts in the world around us. But when Christ reappears and Satan is destroyed once and for all, then all will be well. Then and only then will there be perfect peace.

Now you might wonder, is there any divine peace to experience in the here and now? After all, Jesus did say "Peace I leave with you." What was he talking about? The peace he's offering us now is peace with God. And peace within – the broken relationship caused by our sinfulness has been taken care of by Christ's sacrifice for sin at the cross. And trusting in Him, the sinner receives peace with God. Sin no longer keeps us from God in the gift of eternal life He wants to give us. While we were still enemies, Christ died for the ungodly like you and me. And through faith in Him, we have peace with God instead of the wrath of God. We have a reconciled relationship with him, and we can rest peacefully and knowing that we are his forever. And the peace he was talking about is also the peace of Christ's presence within you. You're never alone. You have your savior who's promised "Lo, I am with you always to the end of the age." And he's alive and present and risen from the dead and present with you through the Holy Spirit. And He'll be with you in all circumstances. And He speaks to us. He will speak to you as you open up his word and receive guidance and promises and encouragement from him. And as we draw near to him in prayer, he draws an ear to us and brings his calming peace within. Nothing can separate you from his love. Nothing can snatch you from his hand. And we also keep in mind that he holds our future. There's a glorious ending that awaits followers of Jesus Christ. And that, my friend, is peace.

So my fellow servants of Christ. And I hope you have said yes to Jesus Christ. It's the greatest decision you'll ever make to follow him. This is not a comfortable and peaceful leisure trip Jesus is inviting us on or leading us on. He's made that truth quite clear today in this passage. Life won't always be peaceful for you. There could be some heartache and uncomfortableness and conflict and rejection as you trust and serve him alone by being witnesses for him and your family and community. Consider yourself warned so that you can be ready to stand firm, trusting, obeying, serving Jesus in this world. And I also encourage you to keep these words that give such peace to us in your hearts and remember them at all times: "Lo, I am with you always to the end of the age."

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for these words of Jesus today. Not only that he gives it to us straight, but that as we continue to serve him, we know that ultimately his peace will reside within us and keep us strong. Keep us going and faithful as we follow him, Father, through the working of your Holy Spirit. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.