

February 7, 2010
 John 6:53-69 / Luke 12:49-53
 The Prince of Peace Must Sometimes Cause Division

Not long ago, we read the Christmas Story, where we were told in Isaiah 9:6 that one of Jesus names, in addition to *“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God and Everlasting Father,”* would be, *“The Prince of Peace.”*

We saw that same emphasis on His mission of bringing peace repeated again in Luke 2:14, when the Shepherds heard the vast Army of Angels praising God and saying at His birth, *“Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth, peace to men on whom His favor rests.”*

Thus we know that ONE of the redemptive purposes of Jesus was to bring peace to people’s lives — peace with God, peace within and peaceful relations between people who were once at odds with one another.

I witnessed the last one in my church in Westport, where two 60+ year old sisters (who lived less than 4 miles from each other) hadn’t spoken a word to each other in 23 years — until I preached a sermon on the need to forgive. Shortly afterward, she contacted her sister, and they were reconciled to each other after 23 years of total silence!

And I could give you hundreds and hundreds of similar testimonies where Christ, and His work in a person’s heart, has resulted in the restoration of loving and peaceful relations.

Yet today, what Jesus also wants us to know, is that peace is not the only thing He came to bring. For as He tells us in verse 51: *“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.”* And he goes on to speak of families, divided among themselves, over the issue of Him.

It’s a division of family members that is brought about simply because one has come to trust in Christ, and live for Christ, while the others have not. And thus they shun, reject, or persecute the one’s who have. It’s relational or family discord, where one’s allegiance to Jesus, and nothing else but that, is the sole reason for the discord.

I’m well acquainted with it. Because I grew up in a divided family where my mother was an intensely devout and committed Christian and my dad (though I think he believed there was a God in the generic sense and did regularly attend church and sang in the choir and helped out with the fairs and bazaars) did not believe the Bible or in Jesus at all!

Like Thomas Jefferson and many of the Founding Fathers, he believed in what I'll call "civic religion." That is, to him going to church was like joining the Boy Scouts or the military during wartime or the local PTA or helping out at community events: ***You did it because it was part of your civic duty. Part being a good American.***

Yet he firmly believed that conversion and repentance and faith and prayer and Bible Study and holiness and Jesus and sharing the Gospel with others, was not necessary. After all, like most New Englanders he was a Universalist who believed everyone was going to heaven — except maybe the likes of Hitler and Stalin and terrorists and mass murderers. It seems that even the most ardent of Universalists are inclined to exclude some!

He refused to pray before dinner. Would always (without exception) manage to fall asleep and snore while my mother tried to watch the Billy Graham Crusades on TV. And as I've mentioned before, when I was 16-17 years old, and wanted nothing to do with church, or spiritual things, being at the height of my rebellion against God, and fighting with my mother for requiring that we go to church every week, he mediated on her behalf.

"Why should I go?" I asked, pressing him to give me one good reason. And he said, ***"Just go. It'll keep your mother happy, and after all, it will look good on your job resumes too."***

So, without question I can say that my mother's commitment to Jesus was the major source of division or arguments between my dad and mom as we grew up. Not because she was contentious, or belligerent about it, or mean spirited, or anything like that! She was a godly woman who simply loved Jesus and lived a blameless Christian life before us.

Yet that was the problem! She loved Jesus, and he didn't. She wanted to live for Jesus and he didn't. She wanted to be true Christian but all he was willing to do was go to church, and support the it's activities (as a civic duty). And that was the primary source of conflict!

I've seen that scenario played out time and again throughout my years as a pastor. Husband at odds with wife, and wife with husband / father divided against son, and son against father / mother against daughter, and daughter against mother / and on and on. Jesus has brought much peace to this world, but He's also been the cause of much division.

Why? **FIRST**, because Jesus does not allow us to be neutral in regard to whom He is and what He requires of us. You can't read the New Testament (and especially the Gospels) without seeing that Jesus calls each person to choose for Him or against Him. To decide whether He is the Son of God or whether He's not! Whether He's divine or a liar of phenomenal proportions!

C. S. Lewis was right when he pointed out in relation to Jesus' claim to be "humble and meek," yet also claim to forgive sins and be God:

"I am trying to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That's the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sorts of things Jesus said, would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else He is a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit on Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a good moral teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not mean to."

Lewis is right. The claims of Jesus are too extreme and too demanding and too phenomenal to simply ignore Him or them. They demand that we come to a verdict one way or the other! And depending of what verdict you come to, you will either fall at His feet in adoring worship, offer Him your life, and think no sacrifice for Him too great / or feel sorry for Him and those He has duped, and do everything you can to keep others from being deceived by Him! There is no middle ground when it comes to Jesus.

Because His call to people was not: "Do you like Me?" or "Do think I'm an ok person?" His call was, "**Who do you say that I am?**" And these are your only options: He was mentally insane or deranged, demon possessed, a con man so good at lying that He's managed to deceive billions, so narcissistic and such a megalomaniac He actually believed He was God, or He really is God! Which one shall you pick, because there aren't any other options!

And though here in the States believing Jesus is Lord may lead to arguments or relational tension, that division increases immensely when a Jew or a Muslim or a Hindu or a Buddhist person comes to faith in Christ.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. I've read of Jewish families gathering and holding a symbolic funeral service for the person who has become Christian, be it their own son or daughter. It's their way of showing that in their eyes that person no longer exists. They are as good as dead. In other cases in Muslim or Hindu lands such people will be shunned, driven out of the village, beaten or even killed for embracing Jesus by faith.

Idris Miah, a man from Bangladesh, writes (in Jesus Freaks by dc Talk):

"I have a wife named Rahana and four girls, ages 7, 5, 3 and 1. I was a good Muslim man, but I knew a bad Muslim man named Abu Bakkar Sidhikki, who would often get drunk. No one in our village liked him, but what Abu eventually did made us hate him: He became a Christian. Some Christian men had visited his house and told him about Jesus. Abu then accepted Jesus and became a Christian.

The village leaders met and decided that what he did was so bad that we would have to kick him out of our village and burn down his house. We formed a group of 25 men and went to his house. We were sneaking up to his house to take him by surprise. As we got closer, we could hear him praying. He was actually praying for our whole village. He was asking Jesus to forgive everyone in the village. He said Jesus should forgive everyone in the village. He said Jesus should forgive us because we did not know what we were doing. This made us angry because we thought we knew what we were doing.

Then all 25 of us rushed to his house to apprehend him, but there was an invisible force that would not let any of us enter his house and drag him out. We all became scared and ran back to his own house. When I got home I could not sleep. I kept thinking about Abu's prayer... I tossed and turned but could not get this experience out of my mind. Finally, at 3:00 A.M. I could not wait any longer. I went back to Abu's house and said, 'Who is Jesus?' He told me how Jesus gave his life for sinners and how I could be saved. After three hours of this, I asked Jesus to forgive me and I surrendered my life to Him.

I rushed to my house and shared what happened to me with my wife and she also became a Christian along with my children. As the news of our conversion spread, the village leaders, including my father-in-law, condemned us. They said that no one could hire me to work in their fields... They said they would give me seven days to change my mind and become a Muslim again, or they would kick us out of the village. Thank God they have not done this yet, though my children have already been kicked out of school because we became Christians... I have given my life and my family to Jesus. I hope this gift is acceptable to my Lord."

That's just ONE of hundreds of similar stories that can be found in similar books, such as: "Foxes Book of Martyrs," / "Extreme Devotion" by Voice of the Martyrs / and "Voices of the Faithful" by Beth Moore. Stories of people who, simply by becoming Christian, get shunned / lose their jobs / get thrown out of their families / are rejected by their friends / mistreated by neighbors / persecuted by authorities / and even beaten, run out of town, or killed by members of the dominant religion in the area.

And though we don't see it so blatantly around here, I'm sure each one of you could share stories of people you've known who have suffered in one way or another, simply for converting or placing their faith in Jesus — remembering that people in general don't tend to mind religion, it's Jesus that bothers them. They don't care if you believe in God, it's Jesus that they have a problem with, because Jesus puts a face on God.

Use the generic term "God," and you can attach whatever associations you want to that term. But when you speak of Jesus, all of a sudden you can no longer make Him anything you want Him to be! Automatically your field of options is drastically reduced, and certain things become right, and others become wrong, simply by bringing His name into the picture.

Which means that if the person likes Jesus, you're all set! But if the person is offended by Jesus, or hates what He stands for (and there are many out there who do), you don't fare as well.

Yet it should not surprise us when it happens. Darrell Bock is right when he says: *"Jesus point (in this passage) is simple: "Expect division. Opposition to me is a given."*

In fact, given the nature of His claims and demands, it would be odd if they didn't rouse any opposition! For as He tells us in this passage, it's not just a very real possibility; bringing fire on the earth (v.49) and division among people (v. 51) was part of His reason for coming!

Which brings me to my THIRD point — The need to explain what He means, lest we totally misunderstand what He's saying! Because what he's NOT saying is that He somehow came to make people hate each other! **NOT AT ALL!** Though some who want to misuse this text might possibly be able to convince people who are essentially ignorant of the Scriptures that that's the case.

What then does Jesus mean? Look at the text. Because there Jesus says, and says it very clearly, that one of the reasons He came was, *"to bring fire on the earth,"* and even goes on to point out that He wished *"it were already kindled!"*

What does He mean by that? It's pretty obvious! "Fire" is a biblical word associated with divine judgment (Luke 3:9 and 17, Luke 9:54, and 17:29). God Himself, because He is holy, is called a "consuming fire." A fire that judges or consumes sin!

Likewise, in the Old Testament the word "fire" is sometimes used to refer to the stinging words spoken by prophets who call people to repent of some sinful behavior (Jer. 5:14 and 23:29), and threaten judgment if that call to repent is ignored.

But either way, Jesus point is clear. When He says He “came to bring fire upon the earth,” He means that His reason for coming was to deal with the issue of sin! Either by pointing it out with stinging prophetic words that called people to repent or else, or by judging it, or by consuming it.

And interestingly He did ALL THREE!

He pointed out that hate was the same as murdering someone in your heart / or that to lust after a person was to commit adultery with them in their heart. It was sin!

He called the unloving to repent and love their enemies / the unforgiving to repent and forgive people whatever sin debt they had accrued against us / the self-righteous to repent and come down off their high horse of holier-than-thou snobbery / the religious Pharisee to repent for heaping heavy and unbearable yokes of legalism on people’s necks and loving their religion more than God / and so forth and so on.

You see, Jesus whole purpose in coming was, in one way or another, to deal with the issue of sin! Either by pointing it out, calling people to turn from it, or taking it upon Himself as the Sin-Eater — being judged for our sins in Himself. That’s surely what He means when He goes on to say: “I have a baptism to undergo and how distressed I am until it is completed!”

What is that baptism (or that baptism with fire as He puts it in Matthew)? It’s His death on the cross, when he will, as Oepke says, “*be inundated with the waters of divine judgment.*” His “baptism” (in this case) refers to the inundation or overwhelming tide of human opposition that will usher Him to the cross, and “fire” signifies God’s judgment of our sin, in Him, while He hung on the cross for us.

He not only knew it was coming, but tells us that until it happened He was distressed in spirit! For until it happened, His very reason for coming to this earth remained incomplete! The ultimate purpose of Jesus coming was is to rid the earth of sin, and the ultimate step in bringing about that end was His death on the cross, or His baptism with “fire.”

Which brings us to our **FOURTH** point. Jesus **KNOWS** that His work of pointing out sin would rile people up / and His calling people to turn from their sin would cause hostility toward Him in those who cherish their sin / and His going to the cross to be judged for our sin would bring division, because it would point to the Gospel reality that His death and faith in it is the only way to be reconciled to God — thus forcing people into that distasteful crisis of decision, where we must either believe or disbelieve; embrace Him or oppose Him; let go of our sin and follow Him, or hold on to our sin and reject Him.

You see, whether we like it or not, Jesus came to deal with the issue of sin. And the astute person will realize that the reason He had to come to deal with it is because we couldn't. The message of the cross is, "We couldn't deliver or save ourselves from sin." If we could have, Jesus wouldn't have needed to come!

That's what the Apostle Paul tells us in Gal. 2:21: ***"If righteousness (or right standing with God) could be gained through the law (or our efforts at being good) Christ died for nothing."***

That is, if we could have attained (by our efforts) a righteousness that God would have accepted / if it were possible for us to save ourselves by the things we do / then Jesus died for nothing! His sacrifice was a needless waste of His life if we could have gained salvation apart from it!

And that's the whole point! It wasn't possible for us to be saved in any other way! That's why Jesus had to come! And that's also why Peter could say in Acts 4:12, ***"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved."***

Yet that doesn't sit well with people who want to believe that God will ultimately save everyone anyway (like my dad believed when I was growing up) / or that it doesn't matter what one believes as long as their sincere / or that all God asks is that we try our best. People know how to connect the dots. They're smart enough to realize that what Jesus teaches is that salvation comes through Him or it doesn't come at all. That's what irks so many about the Christian Gospel — it's only Good News to those who will believe and accept it!

I even have a newspaper article in my files where an editor took Jesus to task for being so narrow-minded in his outlook and so bigoted, as to claim what He does in John 14:7 where He says: ***"I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. NO ONE comes to the Father but by me."***

When you have someone who believes that, in the same family with someone who mocks, rejects, repudiates, or refuses to believe that, then division is inevitable. I know, because I grew up in such a family!

Which brings us to our **LAST** point. What do I do about it? And here, let me give you 5 quick suggestions.

1st) Accept that division over the person and work of Christ is an inevitable reality in a fallen world, where not all will believe. In fact, its part of the process by which Jesus brings people to the crisis of conversion, and in the end, separates the sheep from the goats.

2nd) Seek to be sure that it's Jesus and the Gospel message itself that causes the division and not you, or the way you present it, or some abrasiveness in your personality. Remember that both Jesus and Paul tell us that the Gospel in itself is an offense to human pride. It grates against our innate sinful desire to "do it our way," and pull ourselves up by our own boot straps. It was an offense to unbelieving Jews and foolishness to unbelieving Gentiles and it always will be! Nothing has changed! The Gospel is still an offense. Just be sure that we do not add more offense to the latent offense of the Gospel, by unloving attitudes, harsh words or contentious actions.

Last) Remember what I have often learned the hard way as a pastor: That when people are angry with God, they often take it out on you, since to them you are God's representative. When they are fighting Jesus, they often bring the fight to you, because you remind them of Him. And when they are kicking against the conviction of the Holy Spirit, they will often hit you. Which means you should not take it personally. It's part and parcel of what comes our way when we follow Jesus.

"If the world hates you, remember it first hated me... If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you... I have told you this so that you will not go astray."

That is, I have told you so that you can prepare yourself when it happens.