

Luke 12:49-59
November 24, 2019

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: When you spiritually discerned that you needed Christ as your Savior and turned your life over to Him, did your decision cause any division among other family members or friends? If yes, what did that look like? [Let people engage]

Transition: Today's message is a call to salvation. It's a call to come to Him, to come into the kingdom of salvation, to receive the forgiveness and redemption that He brings. This is an evangelistic invitation. It starts in verse 1 and it runs all the way to verse 9 in chapter 13. It is a call by our Lord to the crowd and those in the crowd who were still open and still learning and still listening to receive His claims, embrace Him as Messiah, and come into the kingdom of salvation and receive forgiveness of sin and eternal life. ***But fair warning, the gospel message creates division. It separates those who believe from those who don't believe.*** Let's read the text.

BOOK:

Not Peace but Division

⁴⁹ "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ 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."

Interpreting the Times

⁵⁴ 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. ⁵⁵ And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. 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? (You're better weathermen than you are theologians!)

⁵⁷ "Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? ⁵⁸ As you are going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled to him on the way, or he may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. ⁵⁹ I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. (A promise of judgment based upon accountability for every violation of the law of God.)

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

We must apply the truths found in today's text to our lives personally. If we knew a storm was coming, we would prepare for it. If we knew the officer was coming to take us to court, we would get a lawyer and try to settle the case out of court. The storm of God's wrath is coming, and the Judge is already standing before the door (James 5:9).

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 223). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Warring (vv. 49–53). As we wait, watch, and work, we will not have an easy time, because we are aliens in enemy territory. The images Jesus used—fire, baptism, division—speak of opposition and conflict. To the Jews, fire was a symbol of judgment; and our Lord's coming into this world did bring judgment (John 9:39–41).

Our Lord's "baptism" in Luke 12:50 refers to His suffering and death, which was pictured by His baptism in the Jordan. (See Ps. 42:7 and Jonah 2:3, and note His reference to Jonah in Luke 11:29–30.) The Apostles certainly received a baptism of suffering as they witnessed for Christ after Pentecost.

Luke opened his book announcing "peace on earth" (Luke 2:14), but now he has the Lord seemingly contradicting this promise. Jesus does give peace to those who trust Him (Rom. 5:1), but often their confession of faith becomes a declaration of war among their family and friends. Jesus is a cause of division (see John 7:12, 43; 9:16; 10:19). But even if there is not "peace on earth," there is "peace in heaven" (Luke 19:38) because of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

After instructing His disciples, Jesus turned and gave a final warning to the people around Him.

Beware of Spiritual Dullness (Luke 12:54–59)

Jesus used two illustrations to impress on the crowds the importance of discernment and diligence in spiritual matters. First, He talked about the weather, and then He talked about a lawsuit.

Discernment (vv. 54–57). If people were as discerning about spiritual things as they are about the weather, they would be better off! The crowd could predict a storm, but it could not foresee the coming judgment. It knew that the temperature was about to change, but it could not interpret the "signs of the times." The Jewish nation had the prophetic Scriptures for centuries and should have known what God was doing, but their religious leaders led them astray.

How tragic that men today can predict the movements of the heavenly bodies, split atoms, and even put men on the moon; but they are blind to what God is doing in the world. They know how to get to the stars, but they do not know how to get to heaven! Our educated world possesses a great deal of scientific knowledge but not much spiritual wisdom.

Diligence (vv. 58–59). Anyone will do whatever is necessary to stay out of prison, but how many people will apply that same concern and diligence to stay out of hell? If lawyers and judges would examine God's Word as diligently as they examine their law books, they will gain a wisdom that the law cannot give.

The nation of Israel was marching to judgment, and the Judge was Almighty God, yet they would not seek for terms of peace (Luke 13:34–35). Jesus knew that the Roman armies would come to destroy the city and the temple (Luke 19:41–44), but He could not convince the people to repent. Their debt was mounting up and they would pay the last mite.

We must apply these truths to our own lives personally. If we knew a storm was coming, we would prepare for it. If we knew the officer was coming to take us to court, we would get a lawyer and try to settle the case out of court. The storm of God's wrath is coming, and the Judge is already standing before the door (James 5:9).

“Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 239-240)

e. Jesus’ teaching about being misunderstood (12:49–53) (Matt. 10:34–36).

12:49–53. To be Jesus’ disciple might mean being misunderstood even by one’s own **family**. Ultimately His ministry would bring not **peace ... but division** because some would accept what He was saying and others would reject it. His ministry would be like a **fire** which devours (v. 49). Jesus longed for the purpose of His ministry to be accomplished. His life and death would be the basis for His judging Israel. That judgment, like fire, would purify the nation. The **baptism** He spoke of no doubt referred to His death which He said would be **completed** (v. 50). Jesus’ mission actually did result in the kind of family divisions of which He spoke here (vv. 52–53). Families have been **divided** and loyalties broken. Jewish believers are still ostracized from their families and friends. However, to be a disciple one must be willing to undergo such problems.

2. JESUS’ TEACHING OF THE MULTITUDES (12:54–13:21)

After Jesus spoke directly to His disciples, He turned His attention to the multitudes. In this section six events occurred in which the crowds played a major part. They were now the focal point in Jesus’ ministry.

a. Jesus’ teaching about signs (12:54–56) (Matt. 16:2–3).

12:54–56. **Jesus taught the crowds that they needed to be sensitive to interpret the things they were seeing. Though they had been observing His ministry they were not able to ascertain that He was truly the Messiah.** He made the point that they, with no trouble, could **interpret** natural signs (western clouds and **south** winds—the **appearance of the earth and the sky**). But they could not discern spiritual signs. They should discern what was going on right in their midst—He was offering the kingdom and they were not responding properly to His offer.

b. Jesus’ illustration of the law court (12:57–59).

12:57–59. Jesus used an illustration of a law court to drive home the point that people need to be rightly related to God. Even in the earthly sphere it makes sense to **try hard to be reconciled** with an opponent—even **on the way ... to the magistrate**—in order to avoid being thrown **into prison** and having to pay **the last penny**. How much more important it is to “be reconciled” when the opponent is God! (The word for “penny” is *leptos*, used only here and in Mark 12:42; Luke 21:2. It was a Jewish copper coin worth about 1/8 of a cent.)

Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). Faithlife Study Bible (Lk 12:49–59). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

12:49–53 The proclamation of God’s kingdom brings conflict because it forces those who hear to make a decision about Jesus. Compare Matt 10:34–36.

12:49 **to bring fire** Fire imagery is often used as a symbol of divine judgment (see note on Luke 3:9; compare 3:16). Jesus suggests that there are elements of judgment associated with His mission.

12:50 **a baptism to be baptized with** Refers to Jesus' impending death.

12:51 **but rather division** At face value, this statement seems to contradict the angels' announcement of peace at Jesus' birth (see 2:14 and note). However, Jesus is not denying the reality of messianic peace; rather, He is affirming that His death and resurrection will force people to choose sides. Although the way of Jesus certainly leads to peace in God's kingdom, not everyone decides to follow Him (compare 19:42).

12:53 **father against son** Jesus incorporates phrases from Mic 7:6 to describe the divisive nature of His message.

12:54–56 Jesus rebukes the crowd for heeding insignificant signs but neglecting more important ones that point to God's kingdom. As with the preceding sections, this one is oriented toward the final judgment. Compare Matt 16:2–3.

12:56 **how to evaluate this present time** As Jesus indicates earlier, His works provide sufficient evidence that the messianic age is beginning (Luke 7:22–23). Compare Matt 16:3 and note.

12:57–59 This section parallels Matt 5:25–26, part of Jesus' teaching about anger in the Sermon on the Mount. Here, Luke incorporates the same material into Jesus' teaching about final judgment.

Stein, R. H. (1992). Luke (Vol. 24, pp. 363-368). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Context

It is unclear why Luke placed this material at this point in his narrative. It has been suggested that either Luke or his underlying tradition may have connected these sayings to the preceding parables because of the common idea of Jesus' coming (cf. 12:49, 51 with 12:36–40, 43, 45–46). However, the parables refer to Jesus' coming at the parousia, whereas the present passage deals with Jesus' coming in his earthly ministry.

This collection of material forms a unit centering around Jesus' longing for the fulfillment of certain events. The account opens with the saying concerning Jesus' coming to bring fire on the earth. It is then followed by one in which Jesus referred to his future baptism. This is followed by Jesus' saying that he had come not to bring peace but division. The last two verses give examples of this division.

Comments

12:49 I have come. Compare 5:32; 7:19–20, 34; 13:35; 19:10, 38; cf. also John 3:2; 5:43; 7:28; 12:27, 47; 16:28; 18:37.

To bring fire. "Fire" is an emphatic position (literally *Fire I have come to bring*) and can be interpreted either negatively as a reference to the coming judgment or positively as a reference to

the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2:3). Elsewhere in Luke it is clearly a negative metaphor. This, plus the fact that the immediate context (12:51–53) is negative, indicates that it should be interpreted negatively here. The judgment that this fire brings can also be viewed in two ways. First, it can refer to the final judgment at the end of history. The preceding passage (12:35–48) favors this reading. Second, fire can refer to how the coming of God’s kingdom divides people into two camps. The latter interpretation is demanded by the context (12:51–53). This theme of division is also found elsewhere in Luke.

How I wish it were already kindled! The grammatical construction for a contrary-to-fact condition indicates that Jesus longed for the completion of his mission, which was as yet incomplete. Yet if “fire” is negative, why would Jesus have longed to cast it on the earth? The reason is that Jesus’ coming would bring the “falling and rising of many” (2:34), and this involved both the blessing of the poor and the accompanying condemnation of the rich (1:51–53). Jesus’ coming brings a baptism of the Spirit and fire (see comments on 3:16). In the same way, the parousia will bring reward for the faithful but also judgment for the unrepentant.

12:50 I have a baptism. Whereas the metaphor of fire “sets forth the result of His coming as it affects the world . . . [the metaphor of baptism does so] as it affects Himself.” The term “baptism” is used in Greek literature to describe being overwhelmed with catastrophe. Yet the key for understanding this metaphor is found in the parallel in Mark 10:38–39. Here “baptism” forms a parallelism with the “cup” Jesus was to drink and refers to Jesus’ passion and death. That this image is found in two different Gospels indicates that it was well-known and that the early church would have understood both Jesus’ baptism and drinking the cup as references to his death.

There is a close parallel between Jesus’ statements in Luke 12:49 and 12:50 (cf. Ps 11:6 [10:6 in the LXX]). Both “fire” and “baptism” are in an emphatic position at the beginning of the sentence; the order is the same (noun/verb/infinitive); and there are the same number of words in the Greek text (three, followed by a similar thought, “and how I wish”/“and how distressed I am”). If we remove the first two words (*dokeite hoti*) from 12:51, we also have a noun/verb/infinitive, but there is nothing corresponding to Jesus’ wishing. Luke 12:49–50 exemplifies synthetic, not synonymous, parallelism.

How distressed I am! Jesus’ commitment to God’s will was total. He was completely governed by the desire to complete his baptism, even though it meant suffering death in Jerusalem (13:32–33). He longed for his baptism despite what it entailed because only through its completion would the fire be kindled. Jesus’ death is seen here not as a tragedy or a terrible twist of fate but as the fulfillment of the divine plan. The divine “must” (see comments on 9:22) is expressed by Jesus’ magnificent obsession with completing his baptism.

12:51 The purpose of Jesus’ coming was to divide God’s people from the unrepentant. In apocalyptic literature such a division formed an integral part of the coming of God’s kingdom. Elsewhere in Luke, Jesus’ coming is described as bringing peace, but at the same time it brought the rise of some and the fall of others (2:34), as illustrated in the next two verses. The Matthean parallel (10:34) reads “not . . . peace, but a sword” and is no doubt closer to Jesus’ words, though Luke’s “division” conveys his sense well.

12:52 From now on. Compare Luke 1:48; 5:10. This division did not occur after Jesus’ death and resurrection but had already begun. The remainder of the verse gives a general description of the division. Luke was fond of groups of five.

12:53 This verse alludes to Mic 7:6 and gives specific examples of the forthcoming division. No doubt Luke would have seen in this a fulfillment of Scripture. See Introduction 7 (1).

The Lukan Message

The implied Christology of this passage should not be overlooked. Once again Jesus was speaking of his divine mission. “I have come”; “I have a baptism”; “I came to bring.” Luke clearly understood Jesus as the one who has come in fulfillment of the OT. He was also the one over whom all humanity is divided. Not only did Jesus bring division in this life, but this division continues in eternity, for the final judgment is dependent upon one’s attitude toward Jesus (Luke 12:8–9; 9:26). Again, the question must be raised, “Who is this who makes such claims?” See 8:22–25 - “The Lukan Message”.

Context

Having addressed the disciples in 12:22–53, Luke now presented two sets of teachings directed to the crowds. The first similitude involves the crowd’s inability to recognize what God was doing in that day and in their presence. They did not discern the significance of the present. Jesus contrasted the crowd’s ability to interpret various meteorological signs with their culpable inability to recognize either the fact or the meaning of the spiritual signs happening right in front of them. They were blind to the fact that “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk ... the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (7:22; cf. 4:18–21). Yet even Jesus’ opponents knew that his exorcisms meant something and needed to be explained (11:15). If they had been open to the truth, they would have been able to interpret the present and recognize that God’s kingdom had in fact arrived. (For similar parallels see comments on 7:31–35; 14:15–24.)

The second saying deals with the eschatological significance of the present and functions as a proverb on the wisdom of reconciliation (cf. 1 Cor 6:1–8). It is better to seek a settlement with one’s accuser than to appear before a judge. A decision should be made while there is time. Because of the arrival of God’s kingdom (12:53–56), it is time to get one’s life in order and be reconciled to God (12:58).

Comments

12:54 He said to the crowd. It is assumed that the disciples understood the implications of the present time.

Cloud rising in the west. The moisture-laden air coming from the Mediterranean Sea condenses into rain as it rises up the cooler hills of Palestine (cf. 1 Kgs 18:44).

12:55 South wind blows. “South wind” is a sirocco blowing from the desert in the south southeast (cf. Hos 13:15; Jonah 4:8). Compare Matt 16:2–3.

It’s going to be hot. Compare Matt 20:12; Jas 1:11.

12:56 Hypocrites! Compare Luke 6:42; 12:1; 13:15. This reveals that the crowd’s sin was not due to simple ignorance (12:48a) but to willful ignorance, for “their problem is much more an unwillingness to interpret than an inability.”

To interpret the appearance. Although Jesus refused to perform “signs” for the crowds (11:29–32), his actions (4:18–21; 7:22) were nevertheless signs for those with open hearts (8:15).

This present time? “This present time” is literally *this time*. Luke may have sought to avoid Matthew’s “signs of the times” (Matt 16:3) due to Jesus’ refusal to give signs (Luke 11:29–31). “This present time” refers to the time in salvation history marked by the coming of God’s kingdom in Jesus’ ministry, not to events leading either to the war of A.D. 70 or to the parousia. For Luke

and Theophilus, this time referred to the “Christ event,” i.e., the time from the events of Luke 1:5 on. This verse is an example of antithetical parallelism.

12:57 What is right? Compare Acts 4:19.

12:58 If this is a “saying,” Luke may have changed its setting from a Jewish dispute, which could have been settled by a scribe (cf. Luke 12:13–14), to a Hellenistic one, which would have been settled by a judge, in order better to reflect the kind of situation his readers might face. The point would be that Christians should avoid having to appear before legal authorities. If this is a “parable” (or a similitude), however, then the reality part would refer to the present eschatological situation. God’s kingdom has come! Therefore, make peace now with God, the Judge, while there is yet time. If you delay, it will be too late. The adversary, magistrate, and officer in the picture part of the parable do not have a corresponding reality but are simply part of the story’s local coloring. In light of the eschatological context given in 12:54–56, it is best to interpret this as a parable.

He may drag you. Compare Acts 8:3; 14:19; 17:6.

Judge. If Luke 12:58 is a parable, this is a metaphor for “the Judge” (Acts 10:42).

Officer. *Praktōr* was a technical term for the officer in the Roman judicial system who was in charge of the debtor’s prison.

12:59 This verse gives the interpretation of the parable and is integrated into the parable’s structure.

You will not get out. This is a measure of the severity of the judgment and should not be interpreted as teaching that sometimes one can eventually “get out” (cf. Luke 16:26).

The last penny. The “penny” (*leptos*) was the smallest coin in use in Palestine (cf. 21:2).

The Lukan Message

Luke’s view of the realized dimension of God’s kingdom was clear in this passage. The “signs” of the kingdom were present for all to see (12:56). They were not the “signs from heaven” Jesus’ opponents demanded (11:16), but they were signs nonetheless and could have been seen by those with eyes to see. What the OT promised was coming to pass. A great reversal was taking place (4:18–21; 7:22–23). This passage builds on prior passages that speak of the kingdom having come and will be reinforced by those that follow. More than any other Synoptic Gospel, Luke emphasized the “already now” of God’s kingdom.

In light of the eschatological situation, Luke stressed the need for reconciliation with God. In the urgency of the present time it was dangerous to delay. The parable in 12:58 urges such reconciliation even more strongly than its parallel in Matthew. Although exactly how that reconciliation comes about is not described in this passage, one need not look hard in Luke’s writings to discover what the required response is. One must repent, ridding oneself of anything that might be an encumbrance to following Jesus, and one must believe with a whole heart. See Introduction 8 (6).

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Lk 12:49-59). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.