

Count the Cost

Luke 12:49-53

We are back in Luke 12 this morning, looking at another teaching Jesus gave to a group of people who gathered to listen to him somewhere in Judea about 8 months before his crucifixion. We've already seen how he's taught them about how to handle the pressure and persecution of the Pharisees, how important it was to focus on laying up treasures for themselves in heaven and not on earth, and how to be prepared for his second coming. Today we see another lesson about how following him would affect relationships between family members.

Family was huge in that culture – as important as it is for us today, it was probably even more important back then. Families really needed and depended on one another for work, financial stability, safety, security, and community. Family gave a sense of purpose and belonging. As kids were growing up they joined in the work of the family, carrying on traditions that were passed on from generation to generation. They often lived very close, ate together, worked together, played together and worshipped together.

The question I want us to think about as we begin this morning is: What kind of effect would Jesus have on families in that culture? Jesus was becoming widely popular and people were beginning to recognize him as the Messiah, and along with that came the expectations of a better life. Families were struggling under the oppression of the Roman Empire and the presence of Roman authorities in their society. They were looking for the Messiah to come and set them free from their burdens and bring in a kingdom of peace and prosperity and in that kingdom they expected their families to thrive. Life would be better. They were hoping Jesus would give them that kind of life.

But what we're going to see this morning is very different. The effect Jesus would have on families would be different than what they were hoping for, and those who wanted to follow him would face a very difficult decision. It's a decision that we too may have to make, depending on our situation, but it goes beyond that as well to many other areas of our lives. So I want us to see what Jesus taught the people in this lesson and consider what that means for our lives today.

We're going to start with some pretty tedious biblical interpretation to get to an understanding of what Jesus was saying. He begins by using some pretty cryptic language and I think he did that because he was talking about things he knew the people weren't ready to receive yet. So he spoke in metaphors. I think he did so for the same reason he used parables – he knew that most people wouldn't understand right away, but those who were born of the Spirit eventually would. So let's dig in and discover what Jesus was saying, and then look at how this teaching is relevant to our lives today.

Luke 12:49-53

"I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵² For from now on in one house there will be five divided, 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 her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

This is one of those tough passages that doesn't really make sense at first. When I first read it, it sounded like something exactly opposite of what I think Jesus would say. In my mind I would think that Jesus came to bring peace, not division, especially within families. It seems that Jesus would want us to pursue peace and harmony in our relationships and for there to be healing, forgiveness, and restoration between family members. That seems a whole lot more fitting than what we just read, but here it is for us to grapple with.

It's clear that he's saying he's going to bring division between family members, but why? Why would there be division? Isn't that something we should be fighting against? Shouldn't fathers and sons and mothers and daughters seek to be at peace? Isn't that what Jesus would want? What kind of division is he talking about? I think the answer comes from the first two verses, which are the verses that sound really confusing: *"I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!"*

What is he talking about? Among scholars, I read three different interpretations of verse 49. Some think the fire that Jesus came to cast on earth is judgment, some think he's talking about the Holy Spirit, and some think he's talking about division. All three could be possible with the image of Jesus casting fire on the earth, but only one of them really makes sense within the whole context of this passage, and that's division. You can see he's talking about division in verses 51-53, and I think he's talking about it in verse 49 as well.

If you think about fire, one of the effects it can have is division. The example that keeps coming to mind is when the Israelites were camped on the shore of the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army was approaching. They were trapped and would easily be slaughtered by the oncoming army, but God provided a dividing wall to protect them and that wall was a pillar of fire. The fire divided them from the army. So it was a fire of division, and that's what I think Jesus has in mind in verse 49 based on the context. He came to cast a fire that would cause division on earth, which he then explains in verses 51-53. So the effect he would have on the families in Israel would be to bring division within them.

But why? What would cause division? I think he speaks of that in verses 49-50 as well. First of all, at the end of verse 49 he says, "and would that it were already kindled!" So the fire of division wasn't kindled yet, and you can see that Jesus wished that it was, and that whatever it was had already happened. So what would kindle the fire that would bring division between family members? I think he reveals that in verse 50: *"I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!"*

So again you can see he has something in mind that he wished would happen, and until it did, he would have great distress. And he describes it as "a baptism to be baptized with." Now we probably automatically think of one thing when it comes to baptism, which is getting dunked under water, but there were more meanings in the Greek language. According to Thayer's Greek Lexicon the way Jesus used baptism in this sentence meant: *"a calamity or affliction with which one is quite overwhelmed."* What would that be for Jesus?... It would be the cross. Scholars agree that he's talking about his crucifixion. He says something very similar in Mark 10:38 when he was talking with his disciples about his death: *"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"*

So in Luke 12:50 he's saying he would be in great distress until his crucifixion was accomplished, and in verse 49 he's saying that he wished it had already happened, and when it did it would kindle a dividing fire that he came to cast on the earth – a fire that would divide families, father and son, mother and daughter, and so on. Jesus' death on the cross would fulfill his ministry on earth and God's plan of redemption for sinful mankind and it would be the core of the gospel message that would be spread by Jesus' disciples. But it would also be the spark that would cause sharp division in families.

The gospel would not be welcomed by many people in Israel because Jewish families were deeply devoted to Judaism. It was deeply engrained in their culture, community, and family practices. It was central to their identity and deeply important to them. If a family member would decide to follow Jesus, it would be seen as betrayal to their religion, traditions, and family. So following Jesus would make them incompatible with their family and they would be divided.

Jesus could see that coming, so he brought it before the people. They had much different expectations and I believe he wanted them to count the cost before committing themselves to him. They were expecting him to make things better and bring peace and prosperity in their families, but Jesus knew he would actually bring division. So those who wanted to follow him would have a difficult decision to make: "Will I choose Jesus, or my family?" They had to count the cost of following Christ.

We may have to make that same decision today. We don't face the issue of Judaism, but division can come in a different way. Some of us may come from families that engage in sinful practices or traditions, and there are things they do when they get together that will dishonor Christ. There may be times when you can't engage with the family and it may be difficult for them to accept. They may feel like you're judging or abandoning them and they may get upset with you.

The same thing can happen in friendships and you may get to the point where following Jesus causes division there too. These are times where we have to count the cost of following Christ. His way is different than our former way of life, and there are certain things we can't continue to do. Because of that, we face division – it might be with family or friends, but it extends beyond that as well. There are

certain lifestyle choices that are no longer compatible with the way of Christ. The way we talk and the words we use may have to change. What we choose to do for entertainment or watch on TV or do on our phones. We might have to change what we do for work or discontinue certain ways of doing business...

Following Christ means that we will be set apart to him and separated from the things of this world, and we will have to make many decisions – we will have to count the cost and decide which way we are going to go. Will we continue in our former way of life so that we fit in and avoid conflict with our family and friends? Or will we follow Christ and live in a way that will honor him? I think that's what Jesus had in mind in Matthew 10:37 when he said: *"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."*

I don't think this means that we are supposed to abandon or reject our unbelieving family and friends, but I do think we have to be willing to be rejected by them for the sake of Christ. I've heard some people say that nothing comes between them and their family or friends, but for the Christian, there is one big exception and that is Jesus.

Following Jesus comes with a cost. In Luke 14:28-33, Jesus said this to his disciples: *"For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."*

I think he means that we have to be willing to part ways with anything that brings dishonor to him. There is a cost to following Christ that each of us needs to consider and decide – it's not just a one time thing, it's a decision we need to make every day of our lives. There are many things we may have to give up in this life and it will be hard. But it will also be worth it. Jesus has promised that for those who do, there will be great reward.

He told his disciples in Matthew 19:29: *“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.”* But even far greater than this is the reward of knowing Christ and finding our soul's satisfaction in him. Christ is the greatest reward anyone can receive. He is the treasure hidden in a field. He is the pearl of great price. He is what our soul's have been longing for and will bring infinitely greater joy than anything we may have to give up in this life.