

The Divider Comes

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's pray as we come to God's word. Thank you so much, Lord, that you have revealed yourself to us in the scriptures.
- And thanks, God, that you've given us your Holy Spirit that we might know you through the scriptures. Please apply them to each and every one of us tonight.
- And may you help us to encourage each other by their truth. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, every year around this time, I promise myself that this year, I'm going to be good at organising my Christmas cards.
- My plan always is to order my cards from a charity, say in October or something, when something falls out of the TMA or another Christian catalogue.
- And then I'll get the cards and I'll send them early in December. And I am getting better. But even though for the last three years, I've studiously collected my Anglicare and Benitas and whatever Christmas card catalogue, I have never actually got around to placing an order.
- [1 : 1 8] But I dream the dream that this year, it might be the year. And so I thought I'd share with you a couple of the styles that are in the running for my potentials for this year.
- You might even get one if you're lucky. First of all, there's the White Dove card, \$8 for a pack of 10. And the greeting is, may peace and happiness be yours, be your gifts at Christmas.
- And I like that, a little bit of a twist on the whole consumerism thing, gifts. Yeah, okay, good. Could go with that one. Very nice. The second is the Peace on Earth card. And it's also \$8 for a pack of 10.
- Wishing you peace and happiness at Christmas. It's got candles on the front, so I won't send it to Paul Barker. But it still might be a goer. And the third one is the Bargain Celebration card, maybe the budget model, at \$6.50.
- But you do get a Bible verse in it. And it says, Wishing you love and joy at this beautiful and holy Christmas season. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace.
- [2 : 3 2] Luke 2.14, or at least a bit of it. And so I thought, wow, yep, these are three really good ones. What's the common theme?
- It seems like peace. It's a beautiful thing that we wish each other at Christmas time. Even happy to wish each other that at any time of the year. Everybody wants peace.
- Miss Australia, Miss World, all beauty pageant contestants want world peace. But we all want it today, don't we? I mean, every man, woman and child only has to look around to know that peace is what we so badly desire and need.
- And it's so right to connect the concepts of Christmas and peace. The angels did announce it at Jesus' birth, just like that bargain card said.
- And in the Old Testament, the book of Isaiah prophesies that the Messiah would bring world peace. And in fact, he would be called the Prince of Peace. And the peace that he brings will be everlasting.

[3 : 43] And all the earth will experience it. And yet tonight, we hear a passage that seems to fly in the face of all that, doesn't it?

And I was thinking, if you made tonight's passage into a Christmas card, you'd have to say something like, wishing you fire and division this Christmas. Happy holidays, hypocrite.

Well, that's a bit harsh. I don't think Anglicare would get many takers for those packs somehow. And I don't think I'd be game enough to send them to my MLC friends.

But Jesus was never afraid to say the hard stuff, was he? And he was so transparent always on what it would mean for people to choose for him or against him.

And he was so clear on his mission, on his purpose. And he wouldn't compromise. He wouldn't bend to the wants of the crowds. And it wouldn't have been easy.

[4 : 53] There was constant pressure for him to live up to the expectations of the Jewish people at the time, who wanted a Messiah who would overthrow the Romans and bring political, social and national peace.

And if Jesus didn't deliver, well, they would, and they did, turn against him. Even today, someone was telling me that Jewish apologists use the fact that there is no peace on earth to dismiss the claim of Jesus to be the Messiah.

How could he be the one, they say, if the world is still in such a mess? How could the Prince of Peace have already come?

But Jesus knew what his priorities were. He never wavered from his ultimate purpose.

So I thought it would be helpful to us to hear from Jesus' own words why he came. I've just got a few references from the Gospels here.

[6 : 04] If you're taking notes, you can hurry to write them down. Otherwise, you can grab the CD or something. But let's go through. Mark 1, 38.

Jesus says, Let us go on to the neighboring town so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do. Matthew 5, 17. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Luke 5, 32. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.

John 6, 38. I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. John 9, 39. Jesus said, I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.

John 12, 46. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.

[7 : 11] John 10, 10. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

John 18, 37. Jesus answered Pilate, You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. Mark 10, 45. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Luke 19, 10. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost. Jesus' ultimate purpose in his own words, to do the Father's will, to reconcile not first of all human to human, but human to God, to fulfill the righteous requirements of God for humanity, to reveal the truth and tell the message about sin, about our condition, about God's plan for us to have peace with God, to call all people to repentance, to a turning back to God, and to offer them and to win for them on the cross new sight, new light, new life.

Jesus' mission was not to bring social, political, national peace as a first priority, but to give his life to save sinful people like you and me.

[8 : 54] Now most of us here tonight know this. We know Jesus' priority is to save us from our sins. I know this. So then why am I shocked every time I read the words of Luke 12, 49 to 51?

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed.

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. I think I am shocked when I read these words, when I hear these words, because I don't always realize how serious our sin is and how dramatic God's plan to deal with it must be.

I want peace with God. I want to be saved by Jesus. I put my trust in him, and I have confidence that I am saved. And yet, we cannot have peace with God without a judgment upon sin.

And that's what this image of fire is about. Jesus is speaking about God purifying the world of sin by unleashing his judgment, destroying all evil, all that is broken, and all that is twisted from its original design.

[10 : 26] Jesus says, I have come to bring this purifying fire, this judgment on sin, and how I wish it were already kindled. How I wish sin was already gone.

How I wish the world was full of righteousness. How I wish it were completely at peace with God. But for this to be the case, a punishment upon all rebellion against God must be meted out.

The fire of judgment must consume the wicked. God must be both the one who is just and the one who justifies, as Paul writes in Romans.

So, where does this fire of judgment, this dealing with the sin of humanity, start?

Where is it kindled? It's kindled at the cross. For anyone at all to be saved, Jesus himself must undergo the fire of God's judgment upon sin.

[11 : 34] If Jesus did not, then the fire would fall and all would be burned up. Such is the extent of our alienation from our good and loving Father God.

No lost could be found. No one could come to repentance. Jesus Christ himself must take the fire of God's judgment on the cross.

And that is the baptism with which he must be baptized. This language here not referring to being dunked in a font at the front of a church, but to being overwhelmed by the waters of suffering.

And particularly in this case, being overwhelmed by the waters of divine judgment. And this is Jesus' reason for being on the earth. He must be baptized with God's wrath.

Every other I have come statement that I read in that list before depends on it. The fire must be kindled first at the cross.

[12 : 42] Jesus himself must be baptized with God's wrath. Otherwise, there is no salvation. And so every part of Jesus' mission must be focused upon the cross.

The NRSV that we read from in our pews translates Jesus' words as, and what stress I am under until it is completed. But the sense there is not simply of the difficulty of the mission, but the way the necessity of the cross, that judgment must be kindled first with Jesus for salvation to occur, the necessity of the cross preoccupied every decision, every plan Jesus made.

He was constrained by his mission to die on the cross. And no matter how awful the prospect, he would not waver. He had set his face to Jerusalem, the scriptures say, to die on the cross for our salvation, to purify the world from sin, to give us not peace on the earth to start with, but peace with God.

But we know that to be saved from God's wrath through the cross of Christ requires a choice. Certainly we know that God moves in our hearts to bring us to repentance, yes, but we also know that we have a responsibility to choose for or against him and we will be held accountable for that.

And that choice is divisive. If we choose to align ourselves with Christ, we may experience opposition to that.

[14 : 34] And in fact, Jesus says here that families themselves will be divided. Verses 52 to 53, from now on, five in one household will be 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 her mother-in-law.

And Jesus is describing here a normal Hebrew family unit of five adults with the father, mother, daughter, son and son's wife all living together in the one home.

But, rather than bringing peace and prosperity into that home, belief in Christ has the potential to cause division at every level of those relationships.

and some of you may know what it is like if you've got parents or children who don't believe in Jesus or who don't recognize the call that he has on their lives to be saved.

[15 : 46] They might say, yeah, yeah, sure, Jesus was all right. But not recognize the call on his life like you might. or you might know that you can live with someone who believes in Jesus and you can share so many things but always have one thing that's not in common and there's division there.

Tension in families can be really difficult over faith stuff. I remember my parents were originally pretty difficult when I first started wanting to go to church and I think they were quite offended and confused that I was calling them to believe in Christ as though they weren't good enough as they were.

They hadn't been good enough mum and dad and I was saying it's it's not enough. Jesus is the only way and I think they were hurt by that and I think that made there be a lot of tension plus I was a teenager so that probably didn't help.

But my experience was nothing compared to some of my friends whose parents still actively oppose their Christian beliefs and lifestyle to this day even saying stuff at their weddings and it's really significant and yet I suspect that all of our experiences as Aussies are nothing at all compared to our sisters and brothers in Christ who have converted from Islam Hinduism even Judaism and whose families have rejected them disowned them turned them over to the authorities even sought to kill them for their faith.

but do you know what even their experiences are nothing whatsoever compared to what it would be like to be eternally divided from our Father in Heaven and this is what drives Jesus here he knows that his claim on our lives may mean pain may mean division won't always mean a happy peaceful family a choice for him can be dangerous yet not choosing for him he knows is more dangerous still and so Luke next records this call by Jesus for a careful consideration of the evidence when making a choice for or against Jesus and so he writes in verses 54 to 56 Jesus says he also said to the crowds when you see a cloud rising in the west you immediately say it's going to rain and so it happens and when you see the south wind blowing you say there will be scorching heat and it happens you hypocrites you know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky but why do you not know how to interpret the present time or recently when

[18 : 58] Phil and I were in Malaysia in Sabah there were a couple of times just a few times when we were sitting by the pool and the wind started to pick up a bit and we didn't mind it was really humid anyway so we thought oh this is nice you know a bit of a breeze and so we just sat under the umbrellas and read our books but then we noticed that the staff around the pool were kind of looking at the sky seeing from what direction the wind was coming and they started hurrying around putting down all the umbrellas pretty much tying down locking down everything that could blow away and we kind of just sitting there watching this and thought oh maybe we're going to get wet soon if we're not careful but we were too late we got absolutely soaked this massive monsoonal storm came through blowing everything around things into the pool and they knew they could read the signs of the weather they knew what was coming but we couldn't so we got wet as Jesus speaks of his ministry to the people of his time he asks the multitudes the crowds to think of a weather forecast unlike meteorologists today who work with satellite images and Doppler radar science people can tell me if that's right the people of Jesus day had one weather tool their eyes just like the staff at our hotel in Sabah the people in Palestine could predict the weather by making a few simple observations a westerly wind meant that moisture from the

Mediterranean was riding in and clouds and rain would follow south or southwesterly breezes meant that heat from the desert was on the way and a rise in temperature was coming the signs of the times were indicated by the breezes and yet Jesus calls them hypocrites because they could see the weather they could concentrate on the superficial but they were ignoring what was important they could not or would not tell what breezes were blowing through their lives from Jesus ministry he spoke with God's authority he healed with God's authority he cast out demons he performed miracles he interpreted the law like it had never been interpreted before it made sense in his mouth he warned them to escape the coming wrath by taking refuge in him but they could not discern the storm clouds of judgment that were rising in their rejection of him and were to burst in AD 70 when the temple was destroyed picturing the end time judgment that

God would bring on everyone who rejected Jesus the people of Jesus day understood the winds of the earth but not the winds of God they could discern the sky but not heaven and not reading this weather correctly God's weather is dangerous more dangerous than missing a hurricane and so that is what Jesus warns them in the final few verses of this chapter that we're looking at and if you've noticed there's kind of three sections in the passage that we've been looking at from 49 to 59 and the way that Luke has recorded these three sections the order of them is really important Jesus ministry will deal with sin and the choice for people is whether to be sheltered in him or to take the heat themselves such a choice brings division but that has eternal consequences so in considering such choices one must make a careful examination of the evidence that indicates that God has indeed sent Jesus just as one reads the skies for the weather and finally one should remember that if anyone becomes indebted to

God then he or she will have to settle accounts we've kind of come back full circle almost not choosing to have Jesus pay for your debts spells disaster and so that's what he's saying in verses 57 to 59 and why do you not judge for yourselves what is right thus when you go with your accuser before a magistrate on the way make an effort to settle the case or you may be dragged before the judge and the judge hand you over to the officer and the officer throw you in prison I tell you you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny sometimes this illustration is taken to refer to personal relationships and Jesus uses it that way when he's speaking in Matthew's gospel in Matthew chapter 5 so if you owe something to someone it's much savvier it's much more prudent to deal with it before you get to court because once you get to court if you lose you'll be this very violent word you'll be dragged before the judge the judge hand you over to the officer the officer throw you in prison and you'll never get out until you've paid the very last penny this picture and you'll get to money and you'll be in the house and you'll be paying off your debt well you'll hopefully got some friends or family that will cough up for you but if you didn't then how could you ever get out how could you ever get out and so it could be taken just in that way yes be prudent in the way you manage yourself in your relationships with others but if you think about it in this context

Jesus is clearly using it to urge us to exhort us to settle our accounts with God or else the prospect of judgment remains it's really the same message isn't it of being sheltered from the fire in the cross or not there will be no release for those who don't settle their debts with God until every last dime is paid now when you're using a picture when Jesus uses a picture to tell us the theological truth you don't want to take it too far he's not saying here that it's possible once you're in hell to pay all your debts and then get to heaven that's not what he's using the picture to talk about here we think about this debtor's prison where once you're in there you're in there unless you had someone else to pay your debt every sin would be held against you unless someone else would pay your debt and of course that someone else is Jesus

[26 : 23] Christ that's what Jesus is using this picture to say you're going along in life can you see the signs of the times I am here I've been sent by God he said all those I have come statements I have come to call sinners to repentance this is your time you are coming along to the court if you like you're coming along to the court and if you don't settle your debts you'll be thrown into prison you're walking along now will you settle your debts will you turn to me in repentance and faith will you take refuge in me well Jesus goes on in chapter 13 which we won't be looking at tonight to apply this message very pointedly to the nation of Israel it's their time he says you must wake up it won't be much longer before judgment falls before the fire is kindled yes at the cross but before the storm breaks but what about for us today well we've seen these basic scriptural themes the reality that Jesus brings division even in families the call to see the evidence that God has given us to show that Jesus is God's chosen one and the call to make sure our spiritual debt to

God is paid how do they apply to us today well we've talked about it a bit but with Jesus ministry still making distinctions between us still dividing us we must realize if that's our situation that it's not necessarily our fault I think sometimes we can labor under a burden of guilt that says if I just said it in a better way if I just been kinder if I just tried more prayed harder then my family wouldn't be divided like this sometimes God might be putting those things on your heart yes but this passage is saying the gospel does this it divides people the gospel does this secondly we need to be aware that when we're sharing the gospel with people this is what we're calling people to you think about

Matt going to Utah he is calling Mormons to leave their family tradition the religion the sect that basically pervades their entire city he's calling themselves to separate he's calling them to separate themselves from that and he needs to be transparent about that we need to be transparent about what we're calling people to but we also have to be aware the cost is something we need to help people shoulder if you like we are to be people's sisters and brothers we are to be a beautiful new family for people if they are pushed out of their own secondly reading the signs of the times we can't say we've got Jesus bodily doing miracles amongst us at the moment we don't have that benefit if you like of him being right in front of our face but but the evidence of God's work is still amongst us friends most of all in the testimony of the scriptures which when you read it and ask for God to show you if it's true he will the

Holy Spirit testifies inside you that this is indeed the truth but not only that it is so verifiable whenever I have doubts I don't know if a minister should admit that I have doubts but sometimes you know you wake up in the morning you think wow this is hard life is hard where are you God I know that Jesus Christ was a real man he lived and he died and we have no evidence to the contrary that he rose again there is no evidence but the fact that Jesus rose again so I believe everything in the scriptures is true we have that evidence but we can also see the evidence of transformed lives around us and of course in the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the church at large the very existence of the church emerging from a few people to growing throughout 2000 years across the globe is a testimony to

God's work and finally the way into the church the way into God's family is no different now from what it was then we all have a debt of sin before God that someone must pay and either Jesus does it in our stead by his sacrifice on the cross or we will pay every last cent before God resulting in a debt that we can never extinguish either Jesus shields us from the fire of God's judgment or we face it alone with no hope of escape so friends Jesus didn't come to bring peace upon the earth but he did come to bring peace between me and God you and God us and God and one day when that fire comes and purifies the world from all unrighteousness then there will be peace

[32 : 42] Amen