**Fire, Division, and Signs of the Time**

**The Word**

Read together Luke 12:49-59

**The Big Idea**

Jesus comes to baptize us with his Spirit and to ignite a passion for him. But his coming brings inevitable division (even among families) as people respond differently to his message and kingdom.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. According to Sunday’s message, what does Jesus mean in v. 49 when he says, “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled”?

2. On Sunday the following statement was made: “Jesus demands that our devotion to him be above our devotion to any other living thing.” In Luke 14:26, Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” Where have you seen the gospel affect family relationships? How would a more faithful pursuit of Jesus in your own life affect your family relationships (or close friend relationships)?

3. Consider this quote from Sunday’s message: “Fire destroys what is temporary and refines what is durable.” Consider together the Holy Spirit’s role in our lives as well as the role of trials in light of that statement.

4. On Sunday it was said that one can know an awful lot about Jesus without actually knowing him. What is the difference between those two? And how do you go about actually knowing Jesus rather than just knowing about Jesus?

**Digging Deeper: Sermon Outline**

I. Introduction: Jesus is a human being who experiences great emotion

II. He comes to bring fire (v. 49-50)

A. Fire in the Bible can refer to judgment (OT prophets, Jesus, Revelation)

B. Fire in the Bible can also refer to God himself in his purifying, refining presence

1. God is described as “a consuming fire.”

2. John the Baptist promises that the Messiah will come to baptize with the Spirit and fire

3. Malachi prophecies that the coming Lord will be like a refiner’s fire

4. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples in the form of tongues of fire

C. Most likely, then, Jesus is referring to his desire to send the Holy Spirit and refine the hearts of the people, but that coming will bring an inevitable division and judgment

D. Fire destroys what is temporary and refines what is durable.

III. He comes to bring not peace but division (v. 51-53)

A. Jesus’ radical call on people’s lives will inevitably involve the division of those who accept the call and those who do not

B. This division will run through even relationships as close as family members.

C. Jesus demands that our devotion to him be above our devotion to any other living thing: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” (Lk 14:26)

IV. Understanding signs of the times (v. 54-47)

A. Jesus comments on the irony that people can understand signs pertaining to the creation (the weather), but they miss signs connected with the creator (the fact that he is present among them in the earthly ministry of Jesus).

B. The courtroom analogy plays on common sense. It just makes sense to settle before you stand before the judge and may face judgment. Likely, we should settle ahead of time with our Creator by accepting the call of Jesus during our lives here before we stand before the Judge at the end of time.

V. Conclusion

A. Are you all in for Jesus?

B. Are you willing to share in the suffering of Jesus? Will you relate to him in the midst of your pain?

C. The Holy Spirit desires to blaze within you. Will you “fan into flame” the gift of God within you (2 Tim 1:16)?

D. **F**aith **I**gnites **R**ighteous Energy

The full text of Sunday’s sermon is provided below by Daniel Gehman

**Fire, Division, and Signs of the Times**

*Luke 12:49-59*

Jesus can be an enigma. That’s one of the things I love about Him; it’s also one of the things that leads me to study him in depth. That in addition to knowing him, of course, which actually is and should be the most important thing. Jesus is the last of the Old Testament prophets, bringing a message of destruction and redemption, just like all of them did. I will confess there are many things he said which I struggle to understand. What should we do when we come to these passages? Here’s where I’m going to make my advertisement for rapid Bible reading. When I’m struggling to decipher a certain verse or passage, I can draw from the well of my overall knowledge of scripture to say to myself, “Doesn’t it say somewhere such-and-such?” Then I can follow my hunch, and with a little help from YouVersion’s search function or Strong’s Concordance, or Nave’s Topical Bible, I can prove or disprove it very quickly. I’m saying this not simply because it’s a passion of mine, but I am convicted that it is essential to finding one’s way through a sticky passage like this one. BTW, if I say something you find controversial, it would do be a great honor if you were to bring it to my attention so we could engage in a dialogue. We will both grow in the process.

**CONTEXT**

David Gundlach has done a wonderful job of opening up this middle section of the gospel of Luke, the “Travel Narratives,” a series of parables, warnings, and events. It’s important to keep this organization of the narrative in mind as we consider Jesus’ strong statements at the end of Luke 12. He’s been going through a series of stories and parables that colorfully illustrate the demands of discipleship. To recap, he’s addressed (and condemned) hypocrisy in Luke 11:37-44; he also condemns lawyers in 45-52. He proceeds to warn against greed (12:13-21), and being possessed by our possessions, exhorts us to trust in God’s gracious and generous provision (12:22-34), and uses some gripping stories to emphasize the importance of servants being watchful--never falling asleep at the wheel (12:35-48.) With this passage, he’s about to take it a step further, but you’ll see it’s not an entirely new theme.

You all know I love talking about emotional Jesus. Why is this so important to me? In order to know a person, it’s necessary to get a look under the hood. As I am fond of saying, “Transparency is the pathway to transcendence.” If Jesus remains forever academic to you, what good is that? It is necessary to know him, so when he reveals his emotions to me, I treasure it. It’s a glimpse into his very soul. Look at Luke 7:24-28, one of my favorite examples of this. (Read) Jesus is upset, and distressed that he needed to encourage his cousin, John, the forerunner, that he was actually the Messiah, and John’s message was not false. We see emotion again here in verses 49 and 50, where Jesus is a little exasperated. I suppose it could be attributed, in part, to this narrative he’s been delivering, both to people who are hearing the message, but likely to many more who aren’t. Delivering truth to big groups who don’t do anything with it is exhausting. So with this verse, he kind of throws his hands up and expresses his combination of frustration and anxiety.

*“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is complete!” Luke 12:49-50*

Wow! Here we have Jesus giving us a peek behind the curtain at his emotions. “Distressed” is a pretty strong word. It comes from a Greek word that means “pressed” or “squeezed.” It’s pretty much “I’m caught in a vice of dread until I complete my mission.” Remember, always, our Lord was a *human being,* experiencing the full range of the human experience, including emotions. That’s why he can relate to us in his role of intercessor with the father! (Heb. 4:15)

Having established that this is an emotional outburst, what is he upset about? To understand, we have to grapple with what he means by “I have come to bring fire on the earth.” There are many possible interpretations of this. “Fire” is used abundantly in both the old and new testaments. In Leviticus, the phrase “offering made by fire,” or similar ideas, occurs dozens of times. In both the major and minor prophets, fire is threatened again and again against not just Israel, but some of the surrounding nations as well. It *always* refers to God’s judgment, and often includes literal fire. (After a kingdom was conquered by an enemy, it was often “burned to the ground.”) In the apocalyptic sections of Matthew and Mark, the word is used frequently, and it always refers to judgement. And if that’s not enough evidence, breeze through Revelation, where you’ll find it everywhere, and it typically means either destruction or glory.

So is Jesus talking about final judgment? Could be. Remember what I said about Jesus being the last Old Testament prophet? It is very typical for prophetic passages to have multiple meanings—typically describing a temporal event that may happen within the next few centuries, but at the same time a cataclysmic event that may come to pass in the very distant future. Could Jesus be referring to the last days type of judgment?

There’s another possibility that seems entirely plausible. God himself is described in the Bible as fire.

*“Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” Deut. 4:24*

*“But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.” Mal. 3:2-3a*

*“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire, says the LORD Almighty. ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.” Mal. 4:1-2*

That last verse is almost the last word of the Old Testament; it fires me up tremendously. Back in Luke 3:16, John said this about Jesus:

*“I will baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”*

Remember in Acts 2:3, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is given to the apostles, and how did he show up? “As tongues of fire.” (Slide #2) It seems reasonable to me to assess that while Jesus *may* be talking about apocalyptic judgment, it doesn’t follow that he would wish it were already kindled, not prior to him completing his mission. He could very well be referring to the coming Holy Spirit, which, it could be argued, spread like fire and turned the world upside down. (Cp. Acts 17:6, NKJV). It would make sense that Jesus wished for *that* fire to be already kindled. The work of the Holy Spirit is not just to grow the church, but to grow us, of course, and the image that describes it best is like that in Micah 3:2, a refiner’s fire—that blaze which destroys all that is temporary and refines the durable. (Cp. 1 Peter 1:3-7; 1 Cor. 3:10-15)

But look at verse 50. “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed.” We know that Jesus has already been baptized (Luke 3:21), so what’s he talking about here? He’s talking about his pending execution; he’s having a pre-Gethsemane moment. When you read through the gospels, you’ll find that as Jesus gets closer and closer to the crucifixion, he talks about it more and more. He knew for his entire life he would end up on a cross. Can you imagine living with the knowledge that was coming? How would it be possible to focus on anything else? He just wants to cross the finish line. Remember that the Holy Spirit doesn’t come in force until after Jesus ascends into heaven; he knew that sequence of events and what was to come. In summary then, what you see in this glimpse into his soul is the tension between his desire to set the world on fire spiritually, and the pressure of enduring the event he knew it would take to accomplish it, which would, in fact *kill*him.

Going back for a moment to the refining work of the Holy Spirit, consider that our trials are referred to as “fiery” by Peter (1 Peter 4:12-13, NKJV). (Slide #3) The Greek word here is literally “smelting” or “refining.” “Trial” doesn’t even appear in the Greek; it’s been added by the translators. I much prefer the reading “do not be surprised at the *smelting* you are suffering.” Remember, the refiner’s fire destroys all that is temporary and refines that which is durable.

Jesus pivots slightly in verse 51. This is the part where things get a little enigmatic, as I mentioned earlier. Jesus kind of sets us up. “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?” That’s a setup, right? Do I think that Jesus came to bring peace on earth? Well, yeah, actually. Didn’t the angels at the announcement of his birth tell us as much? (Luke 2:14.) Didn’t he say “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.” (John 14:27.) Isn’t he contradicting himself? That is a tension in this passage that we get to reconcile. Remember that in this part of Luke, Jesus is speaking in public, to a “crowd of many thousands . . . that were trampling on one another.” (Luke 12:1) Sounds like Jesus in the mosh pit. There were some of his disciples in the crowd, but also many, many folks who didn’t believe or follow him yet, and probably never would. He’s been talking about the demands of discipleship for a while; here he’s laying down an expectation—if you get very serious about devoting your life to him, there will be costs. He illustrates by going after the fundamental cultural organizing unit—the family. He goes into great detail to describe the potential relationships that could be impacted. This serves to emphasize that nobody gets out of this unscathed. Isn’t that a little harsh? What is he talking about? Let me give you a few examples.

I wear this bracelet that resembles barbed wire. It’s more that a fashion accessory; it reminds me to pray every day for persecuted Christians throughout the world. Do you know what one of the most common forms of global persecution is? When a member of a Muslim or Hindu family accepts Jesus and surrenders her life to him, it is not at all unusual for her to be expelled from the family, beaten, or even worse. That is very clearly an example of Jesus causing division in a family. (BTW, if you would like to have one of these bracelets, I have more, and will give you one if you also promise to pray every day for the persecuted church.)

I also have a personal example. When I gave my life to Jesus nearly 40 years ago, I was living at home with my single mom, who professed to be a Christian, but had a man sleeping with her to whom she was not married. (On reflection, kind of like the woman at the well.) The leaders of the church I had become a part of believed it was Biblically proper for me to confront my mother about her obvious sin. At the time, I was persuaded it was the right thing to do, and in my zeal I did, with the threat that she repent or I was moving out in protest. So she showed me the door; and that’s how I ended up leaving home at 19. You can judge whether I made the right decision or not, but it was clearly Jesus, or more specifically, devotion to him, that divided my family. (We ultimately reconciled, I’m happy to say, though she never acknowledged any wrongdoing.)

Finally, another one I just heard: there’s a blended family I know; the husband and wife are devoted followers of Jesus. They have a teenage son from the wife’s previous marriage who gets to spend time with his birth dad, a one-time believer who walked away from the faith and now professes atheism. Birth dad has begun to reason with junior that his faith probably isn’t real, and that eventually he, too, will become an atheist, and it’s beginning to cause junior to have real doubts. Mom and step-dad are incensed about this situation, and stepdad, in particular, wants to defend his adopted son by doing ungracious things to birth dad. That’s Jesus bringing more division into this family than it already had.

The summary of this inflammatory statement of Jesus is that if you devote yourself to following him, you will experience division in your family. I’m pretty sure all of you can think of an example where the cross had divided your family. The cross is, in fact the great dividing point in history. (Slide #4) John MacArthur said “All men are divided at the cross, both in eternity and in time.” Jesus said to expect family division, and it can be another example of “*smelting.”* Remember that Jesus said later, in Luke 14:26, *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.”* Of course he’s talking about comparatively, but that’s a pretty intense evaluation. Jesus demands our devotion to him to be above our devotion to any other living thing, no matter how close. That’s a high bar for commitment.

Jesus pivots again in verse 54. (Read 54-56) This is such an interesting observation he makes, and calls out as ludicrous. What he’s saying here is that the crowd is intelligent enough to observe weather patterns over time and from that deduce what’s going to happen next. “Good for you,” he says. “You’ve taken the time to understand recognizable elements of the creation, and totally missed the creator.” By “the present time,” he’s referring to the period of his physical presence in the world and his earthly ministry, which was characterized by all kinds of miracles and wonderful works, which were foretold about him in the Old Testament. They should have known the scriptures and recognized him, but they missed that their Messiah had come. This is a first century equivalent of a modern academic problem—folks studied in natural phenomena (or science in general) who are completely asleep in the spiritual world.

The Message has a particularly dynamic translation of the last chunk of this chapter.

*“You don’t have to be a genius to understand these things. Just use your common sense, the kind you’d use if, while being taken to court, you decided to settle up with your accuser on the way, knowing that if the case went to the judge you’d probably go to jail and pay every last penny of the fine. That’s the kind of decision I’m asking you to make.” Luke 12:57-59*

This paragraph feels like the parable of the shrewd steward, who used money to influence people. It was a little hard to wrap our heads around the point of that story, since it commended somebody for being shrewd, which kind of has a pejorative connotation to many of us. I like Petersen’s translation because it ties the paragraph back to the one before it—where Jesus observes that common sense is useful for predicting the weather, but it also emphasizes the metaphorical application of the accuser/judge narrative. The real life example shows a way to be shrewd in earthly dealings to avoid rotting in jail; the spiritual meaning is that it makes sense to settle up with God before you end up facing him in judgment. It’s just logical; it will save you a lot of grief. This seems like the most obvious argument in the world. Of course, you actually have to believe in the ultimate judge, and real consequences, in order for this argument to be compelling.

**CONCLUSIONS**

So that was a lot. To give you a takeaway, I want to focus on *baptism* and the *Holy Spirit.*

In Mark 10:38, Jesus asks James and John, the sons of Zebedee, “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” This is very similar language to verse 50, which actually says, “I have a baptism to be baptized with” (NKJV). The meaning of baptism isn’t a mystery, but note the word in Greek means “to be fully immersed and then emerge.” There’s no hedging in baptism; it’s all or nothing. Jesus uses it in both these passages as a metaphor for his death on the cross, but the question he asked James and John is applicable to us, as well. He’s been explaining the demands of discipleship, including the expectation of a divided family, and still asking for a commitment, in fact, pointing out the illogic of not deciding for him. Are you willing to be baptized with that baptism? Are you all in?

John the Baptist said Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire—the Holy Spirit is a person, and fire is the process. I’m taking that to mean He will be a refining force within us, putting us through “smelting” in order to produce perseverance that leads to maturity. (Slide #5)

One last fire reference to wrap up: in 2 Timothy 1:7, Paul reminds Timothy “to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you by the laying on of my hands.” (Slide #6) What does that mean? It suggests that we have a part in causing, allowing, enhancing, enabling—whatever verb you choose—the gift we have, that we might be more devoted to Jesus, and more effective for him in the world.

Is the Holy Spirit blazing in you today? Are you sharing in the fellowship of the sufferings of Jesus? The choice to follow Jesus is logical; the price is severe; the rewards are unimaginable.