

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 08/14/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, August 14<sup>th</sup>

Luke 12:49-56

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### Christ: The Great Divider

At first glance this week's lection appears to be uncharacteristic. This portrayal of Jesus does not appear to belong in Luke, or indeed, in any of the Gospels for that matter. We associate Christ with bringing peace, not division. It is tempting to skip over such texts and give more weight to those that reinforce the familiar characteristics of the Jesus that we are comfortable with. That would be a mistake. This week's text has much to inform us about who Jesus was, the message He brought and the implications for His disciples today.

#### Luke 12:49-56

To further set the context, Luke brings the perspective of a historian to his Spirit-led Gospel account (Luke 1:1-4) and he is writing some 30 plus years after Jesus' ministry. Like all historians, he is making sense of the past through the lens of present circumstances. Luke has both traditions he has inherited, his own sources and the benefit of firsthand experience of life as a missionary where he would have seen the effects of the Gospel spreading across communities.

The following verses are addressed to the disciples:

*<sup>49</sup> "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup> I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! <sup>51</sup> Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. <sup>52</sup> For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. <sup>53</sup> 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."*

From these verses three elements of Jesus' purpose emerge: He came to cast fire, to be baptized, and to bring division.

Fire: In Jewish literature, most references to fire is a symbol of judgment. Some commentators regard fire in this passage not as judgment but as the refining fire of the Gospel that leads to believers and non-believers. Such reference of fire as purification is found in Zachariah (13:9) and Malachi (3:2-3) and God's intention to purify Israel. Other commentators note that sometimes the presence of God is represented by fire. The most well-known examples are Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3:2-6), the pillar of fire in Exodus (13:17-22) and the

tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Perhaps all these images are intended: the presence of God that judges and purifies.

Baptism: The baptism Jesus refers to here is one that he receives - the cross. Not only is Jesus representing the presence of God and subsequent judgment and purification, He also bears it Himself. Despite what will happen to Him, His sense of mission and purpose is clear: "...how great is my distress until it is accomplished!"

Not Peace, but Division: Just like history has traditionally been divided into BC and AD, Christ divided humanity into believers and non-believers. Such division tore families apart. Faith in Christ may set a man against his father. When we rise to the challenge of taking up our cross and following Jesus, this often results in criticism from those who do not. Jesus' own family opposed Him before they eventually came to recognize His true identity (Matthew 13:53-58; Mark 3:21; John 7:3-5). The love of God must take precedence over every other human relationship. This is part of the cost of true discipleship.

*<sup>54</sup> He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming.' And so it happens. <sup>55</sup> And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. <sup>56</sup> 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?"*

The following verses are addressed to the crowds and there is no obvious connection to the previous (vv. 49-53). This could have been a recollection of a different event in Jesus' ministry without context. Matthew reports a similar passage given in response to a request for a sign (Matthew 16:1-4). Apparently, the people were adept at predicting the weather by interpreting the signs. Yet the crowds chose not to see the true character of the time they were living in. They understood the winds of the earth and the storm clouds but not the winds of God and the rising storm that would lead to the cataclysmic events of A.D. 66-70. The people were hypocrites since their external religion blinded them to the arrival of the Kingdom of God in their midst.

### Reflections

Christianity has lost its once-dominant status in the West. In many countries it is now no longer an official or state-supported religion. Even where such support still exists, Christianity is having a rapidly declining significance. In our postmodern world there is no such thing as absolute truth. Christianity, by promoting eternal principles, denies postmodernism. The Gospel has thus once again become an instrument of division.

Various branches of the church have responded in different ways. Some have sought to play it worldly safe and get along with the modern equivalent of the Romans (the socio-political powerbase). Toleration now trumps everything, and the church is left unable to critique others and call out sin. An inability to call out sin allows evil to take over. Without God, western liberalism has no basis for moral judgments. Like an echo of Judges, people do what is right in their own eyes.

It is not surprising that in such churches there appears to be little difference between those in the church and those outside of the church. If the church is no different than the world, why is it needed? It is not surprising that such churches are no longer relevant and where they are still open are sparsely occupied by dying congregations who remember a different world and a different church.

Just as in the second pericope, there are many church leaders who are unable or unwilling to interpret the signs of the time. Today, some major denominations in the West are on the verge of extinction. People do not live forever! When approximately one third of membership is >70 years old, radical change is expected within even five years.

Some denominations have responded by whistling past the graveyard and continuing with business as usual. Others openly express that God is making them smaller for a reason. While I do not disagree with this from a sovereignty of God perspective, this sounds like a convenient excuse. Some are transforming the church into socio-political action organization while others are seeking to make the church even more like the world.

Christ was clear - the Gospel will cause division. There is no way to avoid it. There are no gimmicks - just the Gospel entrusted to the Church. Is our brand of Christianity too safe? Is our idea of discipleship radical enough?

