

Understand what time it is

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's pray for God's help. Heavenly Father, all of your word is true, and all of your word is life-giving. As you say in Romans chapter 15, all this was written so that through the endurance taught in the scriptures and the encouragement they provide, we might have hope.
- So we pray, Lord, that this morning you would give us that gospel hope. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. About a month ago, I remembered that Mother's Day was coming up, and I began thinking to myself, ah, I wonder where we would have gotten up to in Luke's gospel by that day.
- So I looked it up on our website. I saw that it was Luke chapter 12, verse 49 to 59, and then I thought, wait a minute, isn't that the section right after the servants and the master?
- And I began to get a sinking feeling because I had a hunch I knew what that passage said. And so I opened my Bible, turned to verse 49 to check, and then read on to verse 50, 51, 52, 53, and I began to put my head in my hands and I said to God, you really have a sense of humor.
- On Mother's Day, you want me to talk about mother against daughter and daughter against mother? Not exactly the most uplifting message to preach on when it is Mother's Day.
- [1 : 3 5] And so the big temptation for me is to skip this passage and move on to something else. But as my head remained in my hands, I thought, maybe God isn't having fun at my expense after all.
- You see, here is the advantage of working through Luke sequentially, passage by passage, as we are currently doing. We get the full Jesus.
- We get to hear every recorded word from his lips, and not just the words we like to hear. We get to hear and encounter the authentic Jesus, rather than the Jesus who has been thoroughly edited and filtered by us.
- And in doing so, perhaps God is doing today what the great composer Beethoven used to do. According to the New Testament scholar Tom Wright, Beethoven sometimes liked to play a trick on his audiences, especially if he thought that they were bored and not especially interested in his music.
- And so he would play one of his gentle and slow pieces, the kind that made you think that everything was peaceful and harmonious and relaxed.
- [2 : 5 6] But just as he was about to reach the end of the piece, he would suddenly change tack and basically bang on the piano loudly, shocking and waking up his half-asleep audience.
- And perhaps that's what God wants to do today. On this Mother's Day, he wants to stop us from dozing off into trivial sentimentality by waking us up.
- With a loud bang! With these sobering words from Jesus. But though these words pack a punch, I hope that you would also find them to be like cold water, bringing relief on a burning hot day.

And so take Jesus' words in that way today. But just before we dive into this morning's passage, it might be helpful to see what's been happening in Luke chapter 12 so far.

You might remember, at the beginning of chapter 12, that a large crowd had begun gathering to listen to Jesus. His disciples are there with him, as are his enemies, and plenty who are simply on the fence, interested in what he has to say.

[4 : 13] And Jesus began by teaching his disciples, don't be a hypocrite. Rather, fear God more than man.

Now what might that look like? Well, in Luke chapter 12, verse 13 to 34, Jesus began considering some other fears we might have. He said, I know that there are some here who are consumed by earthly wealth and worldly anxieties, but if the fear of God is the compass that guides your actions, then you won't look at this world and be captivated by it or frightened by it.

Rather, you will be driven by the horizon of eternity. And as Ben helped us see last week, that would cause us to be ready.

We won't know when our Master will come back, but if the eyes of our heart are pointed at eternity, we will be ready. But now comes the question, how does all that Jesus has caught so far impact our present time?

How does eternity affect the here and now? That's where Jesus goes next. This week and next week, he basically wants us to understand how to view this present time in light of his future coming.

[5 : 49] So what is it that we need to understand? Firstly, we need to understand that because he will come again, Jesus has brought a time of division.

Let's go straight to verse 51. Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.

Now that is a bombshell right there, isn't it? I mean, if Jesus asked us that question, we would of course say, yes, Jesus, that's precisely what we thought you came to do.

Isn't that what we sing in our Christmas carols? Peace on earth and mercy, mal? Isn't that what the angel said at your birth in Luke chapter 2? When you sent your disciples into the villages and the towns in Luke chapter 10, weren't they supposed to say, peace, peace to all who welcome them?

Didn't the apostle Paul later on even say in Ephesians, Christ is our peace? So yes, we do think you have come to bring peace.

[7 : 01] But Jesus says here, nope. It's the opposite. Verse 52. From now on, there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two, and two against three.

There 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.

What a thing to say. You know, plenty of places in our world are at war at the moment. War is never fun. It is a tragic thing.

But at least if two countries are at war with each other, you could sometimes say, oh, the people that we're fighting against are nothing like us.

They're different from us. They are strangers and outsiders and very much the other. But what if it's family you're at war with?

[8 : 06] What if it's father against son and mother against daughter? Then, it's even worse. But that is exactly what Jesus says.

I have come to bring division even to your closest relationships. So, how in the world should we make sense of all this?

Well, to untangle and understand all this, we need to take one step back. And first of all, just think about what our world is like. You see, how did God make this world?

He made it beautiful. He made it blessed. As Genesis 1 repeatedly reminds us, he made it good. He literally made it paradise.

But sin has come into this world and it has made this world ugly and made this world cursed and basically just turned it bad.

[9 : 15] You could even say sin made it hell on earth. Think about rape victims and domestic abuse survivors and war refugees and people stealing eight men for starving children and you get the idea.

Sin and evil goes deep. And it goes much deeper than we imagine. You see, sometimes we think that all the world needs is a bit of a quick clean-up.

We think that if we could just install some relatively clean politicians or perhaps clean up the judiciary system or level up our education that everything will be alright.

But Jesus says something like that at best is a surface clean. It makes the outside look good but it doesn't stop the rot within.

No, what you and I need is a thoroughly deep clean. You need to get rid of all the bad stuff underneath. After all, God is good and beautiful and pure and sin cannot stand in his presence.

[10 : 35] So, if you want the world to look again like God does, or good and beautiful and pure, what you really need to do is to divide good from evil.

You need to divide beauty from ugliness. You need to divide the pure from the impure. So, here's an illustration which I have borrowed that may be helpful.

Just imagine that you've been on holiday and you've come back home. and you come home to a fridge that's malfunctioning. So, as you open the fridge, it's all pretty yucky.

The smell nearly knocks you out and as you look inside, you realise you're going to have to separate stuff. You know, some stuff amazingly are still okay.

You take out the bovril, the bovril looks like it's still in perfectly good shape, the expiry date is next year, okay, let's keep that. But, oh dear, this yoghurt, it looks like it's got something swimming in it, so it needs to go.

[11 : 47] That's how you clean the fridge. You separate stuff, the good from the bad. Then you probably need to give the inside of the fridge a bit of a deep clean, giving it a good scrub, maybe spray some disinfectant or something on it, fix the faulty switch, and then you put all the good stuff back in.

And that is what Jesus has to do to fix the world. He has to do some radical deep cleaning and separating. And that is probably why Jesus brings in the imagery of fire in verse 49.

I have come, he says, to bring fire to this earth. And just what is this fire? A quick scan through the Old Testament will tell us.

Sometimes fire is an image of purification. For example, in Malachi 3, the prophet tells us that when the Lord comes, he's going to be like a refiner's fire, refining people like gold or silver.

And that is what Jesus does, doesn't he? He is here to give us a deep clean by incinerating away our sin. That's why in Luke chapter 3, John the Baptist says, I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I will come and he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

[13 : 25] But that is not all. In the Old Testament, fire is also the sign of divine righteous judgment. It falls on the wicked and the godless.

There are many examples, but let's just listen to two. Here is Isaiah 66 verse 15 to 16 on the screen. See, the Lord is coming with fire and his chariots are like a whirlwind.

He will bring down his anger with fury and is rebuilt with flames of fire. For with fire and with his sword, the Lord will execute judgment on all people and many will be those slain by the Lord.

Or here is Amos 1 verse 3 to 4. This is what the Lord says, For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not relent. Because she trashed Juliet with sledges having iron teeth, I will send fire on the house of Hazael that will consume the fortresses of Ben Hadad.

So no wonder earlier in Luke, John the Baptist also warns those who are tempted to cheat and to lie, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be thrown into the fire.

[14 : 51] And that is why Jesus says he has come to bring fire. on one side of the coin, he has come to cleanse and refine and purify us.

But on the other side of the coin, the kind of deep cleansing Jesus has to do means that he has to get rid of all wickedness and evil and all that is immoral from the earth.

That is probably what he primarily has in view in verse 49. Jesus says, I need to clear out the fridge.

I long for the world to be put right, for justice and judgment to be done. And that is why verse 49 again, he says, I long for this fire to be kindled so that sin will be burned away into non-existence.

Wouldn't you want that too when you read again in the news how racism leads to violence? Wouldn't you want that too when you read about children being sexually abused by a gang?

[16 : 14] Wouldn't you want that too when you read about people robbing money from the poor? anger? You see, as the theologians helpfully show us, the wrath of God is not an attribute of God in itself.

Rather, wrath arises out of love. Anger is God's loving reaction to the evil and the morally offensive behaviour that he sees.

And that is why Judgment Day exists. If it didn't, perfect love doesn't exist. And this, I hope, begins to help us see why Jesus can both say he has come to bring peace like earlier in Luke's Gospel, but also division like here.

You see, evil isn't just out there in the world, it is in you and I too. You know this because all you have to do is reflect on your life.

How often have we envied the successful? How often have we been indifferent to those in need? How often are we ready to bend the rules a little if it suits me?

[17 : 45] we are not blameless either. But the good news is if we welcome Jesus to deal with our personal evil and clean up our lives, we will have peace.

But the thing is, not everyone wants Jesus to deep clean the fridge of their lives. Not everyone wants Jesus to throw out things in their lives.

some of us want to cling to some other God or some other addiction or some other way of life. And the painful truth is sometimes it is not us but our loved ones who don't want Jesus but want to cling to those things.

you love Jesus, you want to live for him but they don't. And they don't see why you are choosing Jesus instead of them.

They might even feel offended when you do. And so that automatically puts you on opposing sides. That's how Jesus brings division.

[19 : 07] the gospel by its very nature will divide. That is true with your friends, that is true with your colleagues, and that is true with even family.

So yes, coming to Jesus might mean you have peace with God but not necessarily peace with others. Now of course this isn't uniformly true.

Sometimes becoming Christian restores relationships. It leads to people forgiving others in a way not previously possible. But sometimes, sadly, it can also break relationships.

Sometimes reconciliation with Jesus means separation from others because it is clear you are loyal to Jesus and his values above them and their values.

Now let's be clear. It is not that Jesus has come to deliberately divide families. How can it be when back in Luke chapter 7 he restores a dead son back to his mother out of compassion?

[20 : 35] How can it be when in Mark 7 he rebukes the Pharisees for twisting the law to benefit themselves rather than honouring their parents?

Or think of the Apostle Paul who is following Jesus' lead. In 1 Corinthians 7 he imagines a situation where a wife has become a believer while the husband remains an unbeliever.

What should she do? Should she leave? Divide? No. She is to remain in the marriage, be the best possible wife and try to win him over as she strives to be more like Christ.

So Jesus has not come to deliberately divide families. but the painful truth is Jesus will divide.

It is the nature of the gospel. Some of you know this first hand. Someone I know was asked to step out of the car being driven by her father there and then on a busy road after she had told him she had become a Christian.

[21 : 48] some others didn't have their parents speak to them for years even though they tried their best to remain on good terms with their family. And Jesus says this is what you should expect.

The time of division doesn't just happen on judgment day but begins even in the present time.

So today if you find some of your close relationships breaking on account of Jesus don't be discouraged don't lose heart don't think that you must be doing something wrong instead Jesus says expect it and don't lose your grip on Jesus as a result.

As he said at the beginning of this chapter don't let this fact make you fear man and be ashamed of Jesus. It is going to be hard absolutely.

Jesus knows that. In fact sometimes you might even find yourselves divided from the people you least expect to be divided from. I have now lived long enough to experience that.

[23 : 14] To know friends who called themselves Christians once upon a time but now don't seem to want to be identified with Christ or his people. Perhaps today it is your children or your siblings whom you are divided from.

It is hard but we must stay with Jesus no matter what because he is on the right side of history.

But why can we say that? Because remember Jesus hasn't come primarily to bring division rather that is a byproduct of his real mission.

You see there is something else we need to understand. Secondly we need to understand that because he will come again Jesus therefore came first to undergo his unique baptism.

In verse 50 Jesus now turns from the image of fire to water. I have a baptism to undergo he says and what constraint I am under until it is complete.

[24 : 32] You see Jesus says yes I will bring the fires of judgment that's future but first I came to be baptized that's present in other words I have come to die do you remember how fire is both purification and judgment and actually in the Bible water is similar we tend to think of water as cleansing which it is but it is also a picture of judgment think of how water is used to judge the world in Noah's day for example or how often the psalmist regards water as something terrifying even deadly I've put a reference or two on your handout after after all if you are immersed and overwhelmed by water that is you are baptized so to speak you will die and

Jesus says I have come to die I have come to be baptized not because I've done anything wrong but because you have done plenty wrong so before I bring judgment I come first to take the judgment you deserve to be completely immersed and overwhelmed by it I have a baptism to undergo so that the fire I bring later will not consume you that's what Jesus means that's why earlier in Luke's gospel he agrees to be baptized by John not because he is sinful and must repent but because he is sinless yet wants to identify as a sinner he is looking ahead to what he will undergo for us at the cross and he is absolutely determined to do it the language he uses in verse 50 is that of constraint in other words he is saying everything

I do is with this goal in mind why is Jesus so dead set on going to Jerusalem to the point of leaving his family it is for you and I why does Jesus let Judas betray him despite knowing what he is going to do it is for you and I why does Jesus stay silent despite all the false accusations made against him it is for you and I together with his heavenly father Jesus is single handedly on a mission to save us as the theologian Octavius Winslow said hundreds of years ago ultimately who delivered up Jesus to die not

Judas for money although that's true not Pilate for fear although that's true not the Jews for envy although that's true but ultimately the father for love yes Jesus is the son of man who will one day come in glory to judge and to rule but he will first be the son of man who suffers and dies for our sake so that his fire will hold no terror for us there was once a group of families travelling across the vast bushland but one day they saw smoke stretching for miles and they realised that the grass was burning fiercely and a big bushfire was coming for them at a very fast pace what could they do it was too late to run so one man said set fire now to the grass behind us and when the space was burned over the whole group quickly moved behind it now as the flames roared towards them one girl cried out are you sure we won't be burned up the man said my child the flames cannot reach us here for we are standing where the fire has been and that is exactly what

Christ has done for us he stood where the fire has been he bore the wrath that we deserve and in Christ we are totally safe and secure from the fires of judgment the flames cannot reach us because Jesus knew he was coming as our judge he came first to undergo his unique baptism one that only he could perform I wonder if today there are some among us who particularly need to hear that perhaps you are someone who has gone to church your whole life but you have only associated Christianity with rules and regulations and yes maybe judgment and judgment is certainly a part of the Christian message but it is not the sum total because the

[30 : 45] Christian message at its heart is not about judgment but about rescue from judgment it is the good news that Jesus came so you can one day stand before the judgment throne with zero fear perhaps some of you have done something really terrible something totally deserving of punishment something not many people know but you know God knows and you are terrified to stand in front of him but notice whatever you have done Jesus has undergone this baptism to rescue you to clean you and present you blameless on that day sounds too good to be true doesn't it and yet you can believe that with all your heart and if today you are someone who isn't a

Christian but you're here because you want to understand why your family member has become one this is why it is not because he or she wants to break your heart by following Jesus someone who is a bit foreign to you no it's because he or she knows Jesus they know Jesus has done this and they want you to know Jesus as well and so will you also come to him and that brings us to the final thing we need to understand for today thirdly because Jesus is coming again understand it is unmistakably time for action Jesus now addresses the crowd in verse 54 and he says are you not experts at reading the weather after all you know the west wind often brings in rain clouds from the

Mediterranean and so when you see a cloud rising in the west immediately you say it's going to rain and you're right or you know that the south wind tends to bring in heat from the Negev desert and so when the south wind blows you say it's going to be hot and you are right again you can read the signs you're not confused at all about what it means but Jesus now says to the crowd verse 56 hypocrites why because if you can read the weather conditions so well as to make these conclusions you should be able to look at my ministry and draw the obvious conclusion but how is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time after all the signs are unmistakable here is someone who is making the lame walk and the mute talk here is someone who has the heavens break open at his baptism with a voice saying here is my beloved son are the signs not obvious and yet many in the audience refuse to draw the obvious conclusion because they don't want

Jesus to be their Lord so what about us can we not see the signs just read the news today and we know that the world is plainly in a bad place it is in decay it is in bondage to corruption that is how the Bible explains our present world and the evidence is clear for all to see but can we not also see the sign of hope most obviously there is an empty tomb there is someone who has beaten decay and who is not at all chained to the forces of corruption that the whole of creation is enslaved to the evidence is clear for all to see Jesus is the risen saviour king and so that means today is the time for action that is the point

Jesus is illustrating in verses 57 to 59 the basic picture is of someone being taken to court and the key verse is verse 58 as you are going with your adversary to the magistrate try hard to be reconciled on the way or your adversary may drag you off to the judge and the judge may turn you over to the officer and the officer throw you into prison so here's the point we are all guilty but there is an opportunity to make things right before a verdict is pronounced so do everything necessary to settle your account before we are brought before the judge who will definitely make the correct finding guilty act decisively while there is still time before it is too late you don't know when that time will be just this week a

[36 : 30] Facebook friend of mine very suddenly passed away thankfully he knew the Lord but you don't know when that time will come this is not a complicated point but it is an urgent one so pay attention to your spiritual climate are you someone who is not right before God someone who is harboring some sin in unrepentance then turn back to Jesus today he wants to be your safe place but make sure you take him seriously the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once tells of a fire that broke out backstage at a theatre a clown came out to warn the public but they thought it was just a joke and so they applauded he repeated his warning but they laughed and applauded even louder and that

Kierkegaard concluded was how he thought the world was going to end with people thinking everything was a joke laughing even as the fire closes in on them let us not prove Kierkegaard right because Jesus is coming again understand it is unmistakably time for action but remember Jesus has already decisively taken action for you he died for you so will you turn to him yes following Jesus is costly it could very well divide you from family but following Jesus is a matter of urgency for without him you enter God's courtroom as one guilty so don't dilly dally Jesus wants to wash away your every iniquity look to him for grace and you will find refuge for eternity let's pray heavenly father these are some of the more sobering words that you have spoken through your son in the gospel but father we pray that we will take them to heart we will take them seriously but we will also take them in a spirit of joy because we know that the

Lord Jesus has come to undergo the baptism that only he could undergo to take the cup of wrath that was headed for us and to drink it on our behalf and so father we can only say thank you for all that and lord help us to find refuge now in the lord jesus to be so thankful that every sin of ours is now heaped upon him and that we have been deeply cleansed and that we shall be forever and ever deeply cleansed without fail on that final day so that's what we look forward to but until then please help us to keep hanging on to jesus all this we pray in the name of christ amen