

The fire of faith divides.

Text: Luke 12:49-53 for 9/8/2019 by Pastor Bolwerk

⁴⁹"I came to throw fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already ignited. ⁵⁰But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is finished! ⁵¹Do you think that I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵²Yes, from now on there will be five divided in one household: three against two, and two against three. ⁵³They 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."

Have you ever worked to change something in your life for the better that ended up causing division? Last year I made a change to my diet. I wanted to improve my health, so I stopped eating gluten. That means I no longer eat anything made with wheat, rye, or barley. I did this to improve my health. Yet when I told my children about this, especially my son, he did not agree with the change I had made. He actually seemed rather upset by it. I didn't tell my son he had to stop eating gluten. I didn't force him to make that or any other change, yet for some time he kept ridiculing me about not eating things with gluten. The change that I made cause a divide. My son and I were divided over a change I had made to help improve my health.

In our gospel reading for today Jesus tells us that the very same thing can happen when people come to faith. When a person comes to faith, they realize the wonderful improvement in their relationship with God. But that newfound faith can drive a wedge between them and others. Jesus describes faith as a fire, a fire that separates. Our Lord tells us that ...

Theme: The fire of faith divides.

1. It divides believer from unbeliever
2. It divides the New self from the Old self

Normally we don't think of faith as something that divides. We think of faith as something that binds people together in love. Yet we recognize faith does change us. It changes the way we think about God and about sin. Faith changes the way we act as the Holy Spirit prompts us turn from our sins and live lives that thank God for his forgiveness. It's true that we still have a sinful nature that can often causes us to look and act like the unbelieving world around us. But our new life of faith makes us different.

Faith is a fire that divides. That fire that burns in our hearts causes us to think, speak, and act differently than unbelievers. The difference faith creates in us does not bring us peace with the world. Jesus tells us that the fire of faith divides. Our Lord said, **"Do you think that I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. Yes, from now on there will be five divided in one household: 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"** (vs. 51-53).

Why would the fire of faith divide a family? Because when there are both believers and unbelievers in a family the fire of faith angers the unbelievers. What do unbelievers want more than anything else? The want to keep on sinning without any guilt and without any shame. Yet, when a believer, in faith, choses not to live in sin, the light of their faith shines out in their words and actions. Their faith accuses the unbeliever of their own sinful words and action.

Image that you chose to make a major change in your life. To be healthier, from this day forward, you are only going to eat fruits and vegetables. No meat. No breads, cakes, or pastas. No sweets. You, of your own free will, are choosing to eat only fruits and vegetables. How do you think your friends will respond when they invite you out for pizza and you say, "I'm sorry, I don't eat that anymore"? How will the members of your family react when they invite you over for a summer cookout of burgers and brats and you don't eat any of the food they prepare? Suddenly there is

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tension. There is a divide. Not because you are forcing your choice on others, but because your choice says something to those who did not make that choice.

When you say, “I am eating this way to improve my health,” to others it sounds as if you are saying to them, “Your choice of food is not healthy.” People eat the things they do because they like the taste. Those foods make them feel good. People don’t want to give up eating those things because of how it makes them feel. But your choice, your lifestyle, your words and actions, even though they are done with the best intentions, make those around you feel guilty.

The same is true when it comes to faith. When we live to please God; when we work to not live in sin but instead daily repent of our sins trusting in Jesus forgiveness; when we thank God by worshipping him, praying to him, and trying to follow his commands; when our hope and joy is found in Christ and the eternal life he offers, our words, our actions, and the way we live suddenly makes those around us feel guilty. In our desire to please God, our God pleasing words and actions convict others of their sinfulness. Yet, those sins are something that make them feel good. They enjoy those sins, and they want to continue committing those sin without feeling guilty. So what do they do? They drive us away. They separate from us because they don’t want to feel that guilt. That is how the fire of our faith causes division.

And, honestly, we don’t like to see that happen. We don’t like division, especially with those who are close to us. We don’t want division, we want peace! So when we see that angry or frustrated reaction in our family or friends what do we do? We try to make peace by “turning down” the fire of our faith so it’s not so visible. When a friend comes to us and says, “I wanted you to be the first to know, I’m gay.” What do we do? We smile, we nod our heads, and in the desire to not be divided from our friend, we say nothing. When we find out a classmate or co-worker has been doing something illegal, in our desire to keep the peace with them we act like we don’t know about what they are doing, we don’t warn them of the worldly or spiritual consequences of their actions. When a family member openly rejects God and his forgiveness, we don’t want to be divided from that person because we love them and care about them. So when we are around that family member, we “turn down” the fire of our faith so as not to upset them. Human nature loves to find common ground around whatever promotes outward, worldly peace. So instead of promoting what God says is good and right we work for worldly peace by compromising with the world around us. We hide the flame of our faith so it will not divide us from the people we want to be with in this world.

But what are we really doing in all of this? We are not just making peace with people, we are making peace with sin. The more we try to hide our faith in Jesus the more we end up hiding that saving truth from others, and perhaps even from ourselves. The more we hide Jesus the more we allow sin to have control of our lives.

The problem of making peace with sin, and those who desire to live in sin, is that to truly make that peace happen we have to put out the fire of our faith. But without the “fire of faith” we are spiritually dead. And if we are spiritually dead at the end of our lives then we will end up eternally dead. The worst part is that we cannot restart that fire on our own, any more than a candle can pick up a lighter and restart the flame on its wick. We cannot restart the fire of faith. Only God can do that. And that is why we need Jesus.

We need Jesus because he is true God. Jesus is the bringer of that fire. He said, **“I came to throw fire on the earth”** (v. 49a). Jesus did not “throw” that fire on the earth with some stunning show of pyrotechnics. Jesus brought that fire of faith into the world through a baptism. He said, **“But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is finished”** (v. 50)! Jesus is not speaking here about his baptism in the Jordan River. Our Lord is speaking about a baptism of blood: The blood that would run out of his head, and hands, and feet. Being lifted up on a cross of wood Jesus would be baptized in his own blood as he faced the unimaginable fury of the fires of

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hell. On that cross Christ was divided from the one whom he had been connected to from all eternity: Our Lord was divided from his Father. Jesus' soul took our suffering. He paid the price for all the compromises we make with sin for the sake of worldly peace.

By his death Christ opened for us a path of peace, a path that we can walk on forever. Through the good news of Jesus' saving sacrifice he lights in us that flame of faith. By his gospel of forgiveness Jesus fans that flame into a fire. And that fire of faith divides. It divides the New-self from the Old-self.

When you come to faith you are changed. It's not a change that happens all at once. That change happens over time. How much change happens depends on how big the flame of our faith is. The hotter the flame, the more the change. As we "change," as we give of ourselves to our Lord, that fire of faith burns brighter and hotter. As that fire burns in us, the people around us will notice that light in our lives.

As our faith burns, it slowly divides us from our sinful desires: our selfishness, our greed, our lust for more. As those desires are slowly burned away, we find ourselves more willing to give. It becomes easier to let go of worldly things. We are more willing to share our money, our time, and our skills. And as we turn these things over to our Lord for his good purposes the fire of our faith shines brighter.

When the unbelievers of this world see us doing these things, they think we're crazy. They can't understand how someone would give up all of the sinful things they feel are so valuable and important. To the world our giving money to God is like throwing money into a fire. Yet, for those of us who believe in Christ, this giving is a privilege. It's a way of saying "thank you" to Jesus for the life-giving fire he started in our hearts. We give of ourselves to honor Christ for his forgiveness. We thank Jesus for bringing peace between us and his heavenly Father.

But the fire of faith is not always so pleasant to deal with. It's a fire that divides; a fire that causes us pain. We feel that pain when our faith leaves us at odds with the unbelieving world, especially when that unbelieving world includes people we care about. We feel the pain of that flame when we struggle against our own sinful desires. One of the greatest pains a believer has to deal with is the pain of self-denial. Our Old self works hard to hang on to sin. When it does, we feel the pain of that fire as it works to divide us from the death that sin brings. But the more we are in contact with God's word the more that fire will be able to divide our Old self from our New self, and the brighter and stronger our faith will be. The fire of faith changes us, burning away those sinful thoughts, those selfish desires. And as our faith divides New self from Old, our lives shine ever brighter the light of our Savior.

The fire of our faith divides. One day the fire of faith will divide completely. When these earthly bodies die, because of the fire of our faith, our New self will be completely divided from our Old self. Purified by the blood of Jesus, our souls will be completely pure, and we will be able to stand before the Holy God of heaven. In the end, that fire of faith that Jesus started in our hearts will bring us true peace. A peace that is never going end. Amen.