

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 12:49-59
“Jesus On Fire!”

May 25, 2014
(6th Sunday of Easter)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumcl.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

VIII63: LUKE 12:49-59 "JESUS ON FIRE!"

3) vv.49-59 THE PURPOSE AND EFFECTS OF JESUS' PRESENT MINISTRY: FIRE & BAPTISM.

12:49-59 (L + Mk. 10:38)

(a) vv.49-50 The Intensity Of Jesus' Vision & Purpose, "I came, I have." Pentecost After Passion

(vv. 49, 50, 51) Triple Mission Statement = Three I Sayings

Fire 1 I came to cast fire upon the earth (land); Apocalyptic Judgment/ Purification (3:9, 17, 9:54 On Spirit [John], Acts 2:3)
 49 2 and what do I wish? Disciples 9:54 // Elijah, 1 Kg. 18:36-40, 1 Kg. 1:10-14
 Q 3 That it were already kindled! (Contrary to fact) 17:19, GT 10, 82, Wish The Future Fire Was Now!
 A 1' But (de) I have a baptism to be baptized with; Overwhelmed! Ps. 42:7, Precondition = Engulfed By The Cross
 50 2' and how I am constrained (consumed) Divine Mandate: Bring It On! Mission 13:32, 18:31, 22:37
 Water 3' until it is accomplished! Divine Must! Jn. 19:30, No Distractions Allowed (Variant = Mk. 10:38)
 After His Death, Fire Will Come At Pentecost & Purify Hearts (Acts 15:9)
 Three Originally Independent Sayings In Mission Form (vv.49, 50, 51-53)

(b) vv.51-59 Questions & Answers Based On Jesus' Mission/ Its Effects. Division (2:34-35, 3:17)

Jesus Is First Casualty Of His Ministry

Crisis 1 (1) vv.51-53 Question On Peace, Answer On Family Division. //Mt. 10:34-36, No Domestic Tranquility

No Sentimental Savior! Peace Is Not Something Apart From Him

Question: Already During The Ministry There's Division By *The Great Divider*

51 Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth (land)? (v. Is. 65:25) QUESTION 1 (Lk.) (Mt. 10:34)
 1:79, 2:14, 29; 7:50, 8:48, 10:5-6 On Peace; 2:34-35, 19:24 On Division

Answer, Direct Address: His Work Brings Pain, The Call For Decision = The Call For Division

No, I tell you, Justin Martyr 2 *Apol.* 2.2, Will The Circle Be Unbroken? Perhaps Not

a but rather division; Do Not Be Surprised! Answer: Jesus/Gospel Is The Great Divider

52 b for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, From now on... Implications For Families (// Mic. 7:6)

three against two and two against three; [Crisis = Jesus/Kingdom = Higher Loyalty Than Family]

53 a' they will be divided, a-b-b'-a' (4x: vv.52b, 52 b, c, d), Jesus Is The Great Divider

b' father against son and son against father, New Kinship Group Around Jesus, 5 Persons Mentioned (1:17)

mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, Men & Women As Disciples, 8:1-3, 19-21

mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." Mutual

Jesus Demands Ultimate Loyalty

Crisis 2 (2) vv.54-56 Weather Observation, Question At The End. Multitudes (Outsiders)

Interpret Properly (vv.54-56), Respond Properly (vv.57-59)

Weather Observation: Weather Determined By East & West Winds In Palestine

54 He also said to the multitudes, //Mt. 16:1-4, GT 91, (2 Different Observations)

Water "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, Observation (Mediterranean Sea Is West)

'A shower is coming'; and so it happens. Desert Floods, Smart Farmers, Correct Forecast

55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, Observation (Arabian Desert Is Southwest)

Fire 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. 30 Degree Rise In One Hour! Correct Forecast

Why Can't They See What God Is Doing In Front Of Them And Act?

Direct Address, Question: Read The Evidence And Act! Insensitive To The Things Of God

56 You hypocrites! //11:53, Why Join Pharisees? Concerned About The Wrong Stuff! (12:1, 13:15)

You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; 19:41-44, Deliberately Offensive

but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? (kairos = opportunity) QUESTION 2 (Lk.)

[Crisis = Alert To World, Blind To Significance Of Jesus/Kingdom]

(1') vv.57-59 Question On Judgment, Answer/Parable On Decisive Action.

We Are All Spiritually Indebted To God For Our Human Treason

Crisis 3 Question Addressed To Israel: He Makes Case, Leaves Judgment To Them

57 "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? QUESTION 3

//Mt. 5:25-26 Brief Parable/ Example

Answer, Direct Address: God As A Bill Collector! Nation Must Decide

58 [For] as you go with your accuser before the magistrate, In Charge Of Debtor's Prison, Decisive Action: Cop A Plea

make an effort to settle with him on the way, Take Advantage Of My Ministry Now! (13:58)

lest he drag you to the judge, //Mt. 5:25-26

and the judge hand you over to the officer, Better To Confess Than Be Punished

and the officer put you in prison. Word Chain: Image For Judgment

59 **I tell you,** [Crisis = Time Is Short To Deal With Accuser = God]

you will never get out till you have paid the very last copper." Tragic, No Way To Pay Off God = Impossible Demand

Our Ultimate Debt Is To God: Settle While You Can! Follow Jesus! Acts 10:42-43, 17:30-31

3 Crises = Count The Cost, Read The Evidence, Deal With God! The Call Is To Conversion At High Cost

A Brief Treatment Of VIIIIG3: Luke 12:49-59

To meet Jesus face-to-face must have been jolting. In him one met holy passion and a focus that was one of a kind. He carried a charge of love and truth that revealed the polarity of any he met; you were either drawn or repelled by his presence. He was elemental in his use of the images of fire (v.49) and water (v.50) and asked questions to clear a space for answers that called all to decision. No one yawned.

This thought unit has two parts: a) a short double statement of mission, *I came... I have...* (vv.49-50), and b) a longer series of three questions and answers about the crises Jesus brings: 1) vv.51-53, 2) vv.54-56, 1') vv.57-59. The use of question and answer in v.49, a third statement of mission, *Do you think that I have come* (v.51); the use of *earth* (v.49a, v.51a, 56b), and images of *fire* and *water* in reverse order (vv.49-50, vv.54-55) link the parts. Jesus is on a mission, a prophet who knows the future, a Son who speaks as the Father's unique agent with the authority of *I tell you*. To turn and follow is more than family (vv.51b-53). To miss him is to miss God's present opportunity (vv.54-56). Since the time between accusation and sentencing is short, now is the time to decide for Jesus' new movement, lest the moment pass and there be no way to settle accounts with the One to whom we owe all (vv.57-59).

The long section (b. vv.51-59) is a 3:1 concentric pattern (1-2-1') with the direct address *No, I tell you* (v.51b) // *I tell you* (v.59a) as an inclusion. With Luke's addition of *You hypocrites* (v.56a) there is now a direct address in each of the three sections. In the first and last (1//1') the pattern is question-plus-answer, but in the center (2. vv.54-56) the question (v.56) follows an observation about weather (vv.54-55). With a single center, this is where the focus lies. They read the skies with skill, but not the presence of Jesus who will soon initiate God's fiery deluge. They will miss their visitation (19:41-44).

John the Baptist earlier promised that the Coming One would immerse God's people in the Holy Spirit and fire (3:16), which are symbols with several meanings. Those same images are invoked in vv.49-50 in the form of two mission statements: *I came to cast fire...* and *I have a baptism....* After his immersion in suffering and death, the risen Jesus will cast the flames of the Spirit down from heaven upon his followers at Pentecost to purify their hearts, unite them to himself, and empower them for mission in his name. Would that it were now here! But between that time and now is a baptism in suffering which has Jesus' full focus. Climactic events are ahead, and he refuses to be distracted from his appointed ends.

The peace Jesus brings is not easy compromise; it's peace on the far side of conversion, and that's divisive. He asks, *Do you think that I have come to bring peace* (to current loyalties)? His answer is *No, I tell you, but rather division*. He then lists the broken bonds that come when one says Yes and another No. The repeated alternations indicate that men and women, older and younger, immediate and extended family may become disciples and rupture family religious unity. A new center of loyalty disrupts the system, and Jesus does not apologize since he modeled the path (8:19-21). Family is our human factory by God's design and thus our first loyalty, but if it doesn't yield to Jesus' call, it's intimate bondage.

Because of geography with the Mediterranean to the west and the Negev desert to the south and east, moisture-laden clouds coming east meant rain; hot siroccos from the south can raise temperatures thirty degrees in an hour, *and so it happens* said Jesus. "You know the weather, but what about the winds of the Spirit blowing through me at the present? Why can't you see them and prepare?" Why do you major in minors? That Jesus left judgment about himself to his hearers is instructive (v.57). But as with a debt collector, time is short, so act quickly. Not to deal with God is to be imprisoned forever (v.59).

JESUS ON FIRE!

“I came to cast fire on the earth; and would that it were already kindled!”

Jesus, the self-confessed pyro-maniac.

LUKE 12:49

You are never so dependent as when preaching through a translator. If they’re good, they get the music of the message as well as the content; the best even make the jokes work. In his book *Just Like Jesus*, Max Lucado writes of his experience as a translator during a trip to Brazil:

“I did my best to allow his words to come through me. I was not at liberty to embellish or subtract. When the speaker gestured, I gestured. As his volume increased, so did mine. When he got quiet, I did too. (And) when God walked this earth, Jesus was *translating* God all the time. When God got louder, Jesus got louder. He was so in sync he could declare, ‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me.’”¹

Behind the intensity of Jesus is the passion of God; behind the probing questions and answers of Jesus are the queries of One who has the right to examine us and expect an answer, and will! Behind the willingness of Jesus to leave the decision to us, as when he asked in verse 57, “And why do you not *judge for yourselves what is right?*” is God’s refusal to coerce us as a bully and to leave the decision and its consequences to us.²

The case is persuasive and the grace to enable belief is available, but the Yes

¹ John 4:11, “To Illustrate,” *Leadership*, Winter 2000, 69.

² On the differences between John Calvin’s irresistible grace (The *I* in the *TULIP* scheme) and John Wesley’s understanding of prevenient grace, see Don Thorsen, *Calvin vs Wesley: Bringing Belief In Line With Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2013), Chapter 4, “Grace: More Prevenient Than Irresistible,” 44-57.

must come from within because trust cannot be coerced. Jesus made his arguments with the force of love and the appeal of logic; he offers light for us to see and love to feel it's drawing power in our hearts; he then leaves it to us to come to a decision about him and what it might cost to be his follower. Jesus appealed, even urgently, but he did not badger. To recenter life around him, his agenda and new community is disruptive; it's a crisis which disrupts family (vv.51-53), opens your eyes to new realities other do not see (vv.54-5),³ and adds urgency to every conversation (vv.57-59). To be willing to become a carrier of the holy fire of Jesus is a new kind of life.

The church's teaching that Jesus is God in the flesh adds weight to his every word, and his lone resurrection from the dead means only he is stamped approved as the outlet for true and full knowledge of God.⁴ Want to know who God is? The church answers, "Go to Jesus. He is God with a human face; the Son is the spittin' image of the Father." Want to know God's opinion? The church answers, "Listen to Jesus. He's the divine translator. He spoke what he heard the Father saying and did what he saw the Father doing in the Spirit's power."⁵ In him there's a one-to-one correspondence, and in his translation nothing is lost. Rabbis of the day were always quoting outside authorities as scholars do to buttress their opinions with learned footnotes, but Jesus said of himself, "*I tell you,*" as if he had the perfect right to do so.⁶ His sense of mission to put the world back to rights was so keen he kept saying things like *I have come* and *I have a baptism ahead* and *I tell you*.

³ On the epistemological effect of conversion and the healing of perception so that we cross over to a new world in the midst of the old, see William A. Abraham, *Crossing The Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), Chapter 7, "Conversion," 112-128.

⁴ For a recent treatment, see Michael Bird et. al., *How God Became Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), Chapter 3, "Did Jesus Think He Was God?" 45-70. Also N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 1999), Chapter 5, "Jesus And God," 96-125; James R. Edwards, *Is Jesus The Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), Chapter 5, "Did Jesus Consider Himself God?" 67-99. On the resurrection and its multiple meanings, the most basic being that Jesus and his entire life are vindicated by the highest authority, see my *Resurrection: A Pastor's Reading of the Major New Testament Resurrection Passages* (Fort Valley, GA: Bristol House, 2014).

⁵ John 5:19, 30.

⁶ Mark 2:21-28.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Divine Passion And Holy Mission (a. vv.49-50)

My taste in Rock and R & B goes from the late 50's through the mid-70's when I unplugged. Some Saturday afternoons summer, Lori and I cruise in her Z-3 with the top down singing Marvin Gaye and the Beatles and Wilson Pickett off tune but with great gusto. But I remember years in 2000 watching Carlos Santana play guitar on the Grammy Awards. I was riveted by some cuts off the album *Supernatural*, and Carlos' hands were on fire. Same with other great musicians; something alive and hot flows through them and over their audience in a kind of musical lava. And occasionally even from a pulpit when the Bible is fuel and the Spirit a spark and the people have prayed. The fire of truth burns and purifies; it consumes and destroys what is combustible and causes what cannot be burned to glow from within with the heat. In Jesus and in his words the fire of God's holy love was felt. In the famous story of his adult conversion on May 24, 1738- 276 years ago only yesterday, John Wesley wrote, "I felt my heart strangely warmed."⁷ One of the tragedies of Methodist history is how it's been scrubbed clean and sanitized of the outbreaks of divine power that attended our early days. At Coleford in 1784, Wesley writes:

"When I began to pray, *the flame broke out*- many cried aloud, many sank to the ground, many trembled exceedingly. But all seemed to be quite athirst for God, and penetrated by the presence of his power."⁸

The history of spiritual revivals is one of spiritual decline leading to sustained prayer, then of Jesus hurling the fire of the Spirit upon his people with all sorts of amazing effects: dreams, visions, tongues, healings and other physical phenomena. Pentecost was not just then and there; it's a repeatable experience across the ages,⁹ and we need a new one. "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and what do I wish? That

⁷ On early Methodists experiences of the fire and power of the Spirit, see Frank H. Billman, *The Supernatural Thread In Methodism* (Lake Mary, FLA: CHP, 2013).

⁸ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), Volume IV, 288.

⁹ See Richard Riss, *A Survey of Twentieth Century Revival Movements in North America* (Peabody, MA: Henrickson, 1988); on the filling of the Spirit as repeatable, see Charles Talbert, *Acts* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 22-34,

it were already kindled!” And in some lives it is! There’s light in their eyes and a flame in their hearts and a warmth in their love that comes from him. We all need it.

There are images of Jesus that are dear to us. The Good Shepherd. Jesus at the temple at aged twelve as in our stained-glass window. The Great Physician. One I’ve never seen memorialized in stained glass is Jesus The Pyromaniac, Jesus The Flamethrower hurling the fire of God’s purifying Spirit on the earth as lightning bolts. Where is the artist who captures verse 49? “I came to cast fire on the earth. And what do I wish? That it were already kindled!” Whenever revival comes to the church, images of fire come to mind. People are touched by the divine presence in ways that purges sin, light them up with divine love, and warm their hearts to God and one another. And where they go, the fire spreads as contagious.

It was divine love that made Jesus who he was, and it was the same love for God’s wandering people that gave him focus towards the cross. Jesus was a man on a mission to bring his Father’s rule and reign to bear on a broken and rebellious world no matter the resistance. He was literally *one man against the world*: the only healthy human in the vast cancer ward of humanity; the only sighted man in a world of the blind; the only pure soul among the polluted, the only free one in whom Satan held no territory, and in a world of many religions and philosophies he was the only one who saw and spoke God’s Word clearly. Jesus is God’s minority report; he is *one man against the world* with no one, before or since, his equal. Not one among others but one over all. And nothing would stop him from getting to Jerusalem and confronting the powers of government and religion with the holy fire he carried. They blew out his candle on Friday, but God lit his torch again on Easter that his presence might be available to all across the ages. Jesus Christ is near to us.

So where did we get the idea faith in him would make us cool and rational, detached and unemotional? Why not ask God to send the fire of divine love back to set us ablaze? What are we frightened of? I tell you, we are frightened of what might happen if we got too near the flame. It might burn away some sinful habits in which we have much invested; it might expose some of our dark side to the light; it might heat us up with some new energies and plant in our minds divine illuminations; it might toast our cherished prejudices and incinerate some of our brittle respectability. It might make us burn with a love for Jesus and others than cannot be contained, and then what would we do? Can you feel the heat and intensity of his words? What is my mission? “I came, I came to cast fire on the earth; and what do I wish? That it were already kindled.” Sounds like a pyro to me! A truly dangerous man. Smokin!

The fire of which Jesus speaks is the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the much-neglected divine person without whose presence nothing happened in Jesus or will happen in us. Light a match in the darkness and you will see what Jesus was to his world; light a million matches and you will see what he wants his church to be in the power of the Spirit. In the passionate declaration of verse 49 Jesus looked ahead to the day when, ascended to the Father’s right hand after resurrection, he would pour the Holy Spirit upon the church as a river of fire at Pentecost, the flame first resting upon and then slipping inside to take up permanent residence within each of the one hundred and twenty there gathered.¹⁰ In that moment something inside them was purified and kindled with light and heat from above. The one who filled Jesus at his baptism¹¹ now filled them. They were ready for mission and divine assignments.

About 2:00am a pastor received a call from the fire department that the sanctuary was on fire. After dressing in a hurry and wondering whether the Trustees had purchased enough insurance, he arrived at a chaotic scene. Looking around, he noticed a number of his inactive and dropped out members standing at the curb. He went up to one man, “John, good to see you back at church.”

“Yea, preacher,” he replied, “first time this church’s been on fire about anything in a long, long time.”

Dumb story I admit, but it makes the point that you don’t have to invite people to a fire; they’re drawn by the light and the warmth and sheer fascination. Perhaps the most dangerous prayer we could pray is “Come, Holy Spirit, light us up with the flames of divine love and the full range of the Spirit’s amazing gifts.”

Don’t equate this holy fire merely with emotion. It’s bigger than that. It is not something we *work up* but something that *comes down* upon us from God. It may include a range of intense feelings, from terror over judgment to the spiritual ecstasy of an altered state of consciousness charismatics call *resting in the Spirit*. It’s not shallow but deep, so deep it illumines the mind, kindles new desires, stirs the imagination with beauty and energizes the will for obedience to God, and all at the same time. The whole human person in all their capacities is illumined with divine fire. A church full of the Spirit’s flame of love will blossom in social action even as it flourishes in the arts. Drama, music, painting and dance and poetry will spring up

¹⁰ Acts 2:1-21.

¹¹ Luke 3:1-22.

under the Spirit’s inspiration as well as a new heart for the poor. A truly Spirit-filled church is as likely to protest a public injustice as hold a prayer meeting. A Spirit-filled church will pray boldly for the healing of broken bodies and minds and pray also for the mending of the tattered social fabric of which we’re all a part.¹² It will grieve over personal and social sins alike and let neither remain unaddressed and therefore protected. It will claim the whole of life and offer it back to God in praise.

It was eleven years into the Methodist revival in 1749 that Charles Wesley wrote a hymn on this verse. In his own day he saw the flames of divine love moving among the societies and class meetings of the early Methodists; scriptural holiness was spreading across the land. Jesus declared, “I came to cast fire on the earth; and what do I wish? That it were already kindled.” Charles turned it into poetry:

“See how great a flame aspires, kindled by a spark of grace.
Jesus’ love the nations fires, sets the kingdom on a blaze.
To bring fire on earth he came, kindled in some hearts it is;
O that all might catch the flame, all partake the glorious bliss.”¹³

But how is it that this Holy Spirit, resident in Jesus, is to be loosed and released? By an overwhelming act of love. Jesus freely offers himself; he will be engulfed and baptized in innocent suffering on a cross. He will break the back of evil and take the full weight of accumulated human sin into his own body. He offers the world convincing evidence that God will stop at no lengths to win himself a people who follow and honor the Son. Verse 50, “But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished.” The fire of Pentecost follows the pain of Calvary and the great reversal of the resurrection.

Jesus faced death knowing God would use his self-offering to release the Holy Spirit onto the church. Jesus had a mission so clear not even a horrible death could make him shrink back. Others have walked in his path, daring to be agents of the divine fire. In 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King wrote prophetically:

¹² See Tilda Norberg and Robert D. Webber, *Stretch Out Your Hand: Exploring Healing Prayer* (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1998), Chapter 5, “Social Healing: Praying For Institutions,” 91-113.

¹³ Hymn No. 541, “See How Great a Flame Aspires,” *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The UM Publishing House, 1989).

“The minute you conquer the fear of death, at that moment you are free. I submit to you that if a man hasn’t discovered something that he will live for, he isn’t fit to live.”¹⁴

And just shortly before his death these words:

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I am not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will.”¹⁵

There is something deficient with faith that has lost its fire and its desire to be used of God. A bored church and complacent church is a dangerous church to belong to. Instead of the fiery fellowship, have we Methodists become *the frozen chosen*, the first church of the Frigidaire? When we say *Main Street*, do people think daring and dangerous faith, or something more manageable? You tell me.

A newcomer to a Midwestern town stood on the corner and looked up at the steeples of two churches, one Catholic, the other Methodist. There on the peak of the Catholic Church was a cross- which he understood, but on the steeple of the Methodist Church was a lightning rod. When he inquired he was told, “God struck us once during Wesley’s day, and we want to make sure it doesn’t happen again!”

“I came to cast fire on the earth, and what do I wish? That it were already kindled!” What would happen if Jesus hurled a few fireballs at us? The wood is wet and some dry rot has set in. Could we catch fire again? I don’t have any heavenly matches, just a Bible and a pulpit and a weekly opportunity. Preachers point, but we cannot deliver. Prayer stands with open hands but not demand. What we need we can’t manufacture or program or buy; it has to come from God, and that is fire from heaven, and intense sense of God’s holy love pressing down on us for a response.

A Split Family (b1. vv.51-53)

This kingdom Jesus brings is disruptive. We enjoy the comfortable cocoon of family life where it exists; we gossip about the weather in endless small talk; we are

¹⁴ “To Illustrate,” *Leadership*, Winter 2000, 69.

¹⁵ Robert Backhouse, *The Ultimate Speaker’s Handbook* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1997), 80.

suspicious of preachers who invent this or that crisis. Life goes smoothly, and anything that threatens our hometown homeostasis is resisted. But Jesus comes to ask disturbing questions and give even more troubling answers. Verse 51 is his first question and answer, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”

The peace Jesus brings is not the calm *before* the storm but the calm *after* it. It is not peace on *my* terms or *your* terms but *his*. In a time when all the social commentators agree that the family is under great stress, what are we to make of a passage like this which seems to revel in broken relationships between father and son, between mother and daughter, between daughter in law and mother in law? Why did Jesus say this? Doesn't he know the family is the basic building block of church and society? Yes, he grew up in one, remember? And when he broke ranks with them to engage his mission at around age thirty, they were not happy? At one point they thought him crazy and ganged up to carry him home.¹⁶ That which is near and dear to us can also easily become an idol and an end in itself. Family relationships are temporary. They will not endure in present form into the kingdom of God where all are children of the Heavenly Father and brothers and sisters of one another. The Mormons are wrong here; blood ties are a temporary arrangement. They are not ultimate, and even in this life must yield to a higher loyalty.

Picture a Jewish family: father, mother, daughter and son. Attend synagogue, keep the law of Moses, go to the festivals in Jerusalem. The son gets married. Big party. Good Jewish girl from the neighboring village. Then one day Jesus comes through town with his followers. The daughter and the son and his wife hear the call to follow him as disciples. They leave home and job and past and future for this open-ended kingdom adventure on the road with a Jesus who's perhaps a decade their senior. One house no longer. Three against two and two against three. Father versus son, daughter versus mother, mother in law against daughter in law. To one the Messiah, to another a false prophet. It doesn't take much to see how this could happen. Loyalty to Jesus is more important if there is a choice to be made. He is the great divider. One member of a marriage is converted. They can't hide their love for the Lord and the joy they feel at church with new friends. They've entered a new world, and new tensions with the old world are created. They don't get drunk or do drugs any more. They want to tithe the family income. New tensions arise over family priorities and the use of weekends. It's hard to be married to someone who

¹⁶ Mark 3:31-35.

doesn't share your faith and who doesn't comprehend the deepest convictions of your soul. There is much you can't share for fear of ridicule. You have different centers of life, as Jesus promised, "they *will be* divided...." Hopefully the spouse and children will come to Christ as well, but there's no guarantee and often a long time lag. Supporting believers in these setting requires pastoral discernment and great patience. Sometimes I've said, "You are spending too much time at church. Twice a week is enough. Let your light shine at home." To others I've said, "You have a right to be here Sunday mornings. Don't let him bully you any longer. You're not his property; you're an equal." Jesus brings division to families where not all are his followers. Count on it. It's the prime reason Scripture counsels marriage within the faith because it removes a major obstacle.

Seeing What Others Do Not (b2. vv.54-56)

Jesus is the great polarizer. It's as if humanity were iron filings spread out on a sheet of paper with Jesus is the magnet. Every filing lines up either with the North or South. Every person is attracted to or repelled by the person of Jesus Christ, because he's God's magnet. The power of his being cannot be ignored, and the only safe place in the universe is to be rightly related to him.

Thank God for the weather, or some people would have nothing to talk about. Small talk's OK. It gets conversations started on safe, common ground. Doing it well can even be an art and means of putting people at ease.¹⁷ But there's a dark side to endless chattiness that never goes deeper than the surface. Endless remarks about sports or politics or one's children or one's troubles can be an excuse for continuing as a shallow person, not overtly bad or wicked (at least that would be interesting), just trendy and trivial and trite and nice and neutral and bland and boring and absolutely out of touch with what God's doing all around you. *Trivial Pursuit* is more than a board game; for some it's an obsession, and life is deeper than its teeming surface.

To the west of Israel is the Mediterranean. When dark clouds move inland from the sea, it's a sure bet a shower's on the way. People look up, "A shower is coming," and so it happens. And when the wind blows in from the Negev desert the temperature can rise thirty degrees in an hour. "And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be a scorching heat'; and it happens." Jesus was an

¹⁷ See Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Waco, TX: Word, 1989), chapter 10, "The Ministry of Small Talk," 117-122.

astute observer of the small talk of people, probably even did some of it himself to break the ice. But to talk about the minor when the momentous is present is distraction. To read the sky with accuracy and miss the opportunity that stands in front of you in the person of the Son of God is blindness. Perhaps as many people will be lost through triviality as through serious moral turpitude. You don't have to be overtly wicked by the standards of the day to miss the kingdom of God, just blinded by trivialities and village small talk. When do we talk about the things that really matter? About God? About Jesus' amazing life? About heaven and hell? About Satan and evil? About justice? About loving one another? About reaching the lost in our city? About reinventing this church for the next hundred years? A million inane distractions are blinding us. Aim at a minimum of one serious conversation a day. Stop cooperating with the conspiracy of the trivial.

I've uncovered four cures for trivial living. First, cut off the TV and the radio and the cell phone. Get quiet. Second, start reading through one of the four gospels slowly until the Holy Spirit arrests your attention. Meditate there a while until God speaks and then move on.¹⁸ Write down what you hear in a journal. Thirdly, save and set aside twenty dollars, maybe a hundred, and say, "Lord, show me some way to invest this money for the kingdom." And fourthly, involve yourself in the pain and struggle of some other person. You cannot do those four things consistently and stay content with afternoons of soap operas and talk shows and romance novels and endless hours watching someone else play sports.

I have a broad general knowledge and count everyone I meet as my next teacher. Lori says I should go on Jeopardy, but I am impatient with chitter-chatter in endless circles. I want to get down to business, "How is it with your soul? Where have you seen the grace of God lately? Has anyone told you about the Savior?" Jesus confronted the afternoon talk show hosts of his day, "You know how to interpret the fashions and trends; but why do you not know how to interpret *the present time*?" To know everything about nothing is not what we were designed for. They droned on about which way the wind was blowing and missed the one who stood before them! Jesus is not offended by the chatty surface of life; after all, he lived for thirty years amidst the common trivialities of Nazareth where everyone knew everyone else's business and was probably asked once a week, "Why aren't you yet married?" But he refuses to stay on the surface because the stakes are so high,

¹⁸ On the imaginative reading of Scripture for spiritual growth, see Gregory Boyd, *Seeing Is Believing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004).

and when we do, he asks some serious questions. Why do you know so much about the weather and so little about what matters?”

The Burden Of Our Freedom (b1' vv.57-59)

“And why do you not *judge for yourselves* what is right?” is his third question. So that is where Jesus left it- with each of us and our own judgment.

Debtors prisons were common in Jesus’ day. A creditor could have you thrown in jail and kept there until rescued by a family member or the sale of some property. Some were even beaten while in jail to prompt a family member to act.¹⁹ The scene Jesus sets is one of a personal crisis. You are on your way to court for a debt you cannot pay. All of us are morally bankrupt, and a forensic accounting is coming. If you don’t settle on the way, you end up in prison with no escape, verse 59. “I tell you, you will not get out till you have paid the very last copper.”

Now why did Jesus say this? Simple. This is the situation of every human being. We owe God. Our sin and rebellion has amassed a debt we cannot pay. We deserve not only imprisonment but death. To betray your country is treason; to betray your Maker is far more serious. We settle with God by dealing with Jesus Christ who offers forgiveness, canceling our debts and welcoming us back into fellowship with the God we have spurned, there to begin a new life. Charles Hodge wrote, “It is important that when we come to die we have nothing to do but to die.”²⁰ The time is always *now* to deal with God. Procrastination is deadly, yet how many young and old fools have I heard say, “I’ll come back to God and live a good life after I’d had my fun,” and how few ever make that turn because most of what counts for them as fun corrupts their character and lays a thick layer of callous over the consciences. They become more and more insensitive to the still, small voice of God. And all the while the interest on their debt grows more and more. There is a day coming, said Jesus, when they will have missed the last chance and be handed to the jailer.

CONCLUSION

¹⁹ S. Safrai and M. Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress, 1974), 1554-555, discusses private law and torts.

²⁰ Albert M. Wells, *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 54.

Toilet tissue was strewn across the bathroom floor. A window shade lay crumpled on the carpet. Magic Marker starbursts on the kitchen wall. All evidence that a three year old daughter is alive and well. When mom and dad inquired if she was responsible for the infractions, she denied any knowledge of them. But when asked if she knew who was responsible she confessed, “My shadow did it.”²¹

We all have one, don’t we? With us all the time, and it gets us into all kinds of trouble, and with it all the sophisticated covers we use to hide from the truth. Liberal theology tells us God is not a holy and righteous judge and that there’s no eternal prison to avoid. As Richard Niebuhr put it a generation ago, “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”²² Methodism has drunk deeply from this now dried-up well, and it’s made us all weak. On the other hand, American pop-culture drowns us in constant trivialities, and we consent to our captivity in things that do not matter. And some make of the family the be all and end all of living. “Oh, we can’t come to worship. Sunday is our family day.”

Can you now understand why Jesus struck so hard at our excuses for not dealing with him? He is the disrupter of family, the exposor of trivia, the one who reminds us we are on our way to a Judge with a debt we cannot pay. This is his fire, that he tells us the truth in love, and when we turn towards him with a simple prayer, “Help, me,” we find him a strong and true friend. You may not be, but Jesus is serious, deadly serious, resurrection serious, last judgment serious, joyfully serious he can turn our life to the good. A rabbi once wrote, “A time is coming on all men when they will be either born again, or wish they had never been born at all.”²³

What do we need at Main Street? A fresh visitation of the holy fire of God’s disruptive love. My hope is that Jesus said he was eager to give it. May he throw down fire from heaven and revive his people, beginning with me. There’s just got to be more to it than this.

²¹ G. Curtis Jones and Paul H. Jones, *Stories from Life for Preaching & Teaching* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1998), 219-220.

²² *The Kingdom of God in America*, www.goodreads.com/quotes/616058.

²³ Raymond McHenry, *The Best of ‘In Other Words,’* (Houston, TX: Raymond McHenry, 1996), 147.

JUSTIN MARTYR, *SECOND APOLOGY* 2.2

CHAPTER II: URBICUS CONDEMNS THE CHRISTIANS TO DEATH.

(2nd century example of how Christian faith disrupted a pagan family and led to martyrs.)

A certain woman lived with an intemperate husband; she herself, too, having formerly been intemperate. But when she came to the knowledge of the teachings of Christ she became sober-minded, and endeavoured to persuade her husband likewise to be temperate, citing the teaching of Christ, and assuring him that there shall be punishment in eternal fire inflicted upon those who do not live temperately and conformably to right reason. But he, continuing in the same excesses, alienated his wife from him by his actions. For she, considering it wicked to live any longer as a wife with a husband who sought in every way means of indulging in pleasure contrary to the law of nature, and in violation of what is right, wished to be divorced from him. And when she was overpersuaded by her friends, who advised her still to continue with him, in the idea that some time or other her husband might give hope of amendment, she did violence to her own feeling and remained with him. But when her husband had gone into Alexandria, and was reported to be conducting himself worse than ever, she- that she might not, by continuing in matrimonial connection with him, and by sharing his table and his bed, become a partaker also in his wickednesses and impieties- gave him what you call a bill of divorce, and was separated from him. But this noble husband of hers, while he ought to have been rejoicing that those actions which formerly she unhesitatingly committed with the servants and hirelings, when she delighted in drunkenness and every vice, she had now given up, and desired that he too should give up the same, when she had gone from him without his desire, brought an accusation against her, affirming that she was a Christian. And she presented a paper to thee, the Emperor, requesting that first she be permitted to arrange her affairs, and afterwards to make her defence against the accusation, when her affairs were set in order. And this you granted. And her quondam husband, since he was now no longer able to prosecute her, directed his assaults against a man, Ptolemaeus, whom Urbicus punished, and who had been her teacher in the Christian doctrines.

And this he did in the following way. He persuaded a centurion- who had cast Ptolemaeus into prison, and who was friendly to himself- to take Ptolemaeus and interrogate him on this sole point: whether he were a Christian? And Ptolemaeus, being a lover of truth, and not of a deceitful or false disposition, when he confessed himself to be a Christian, was bound by the centurion, and for a long time punished in the prison. And, at last, when the man came to Urbicus, he was asked this one question only: whether he was a Christian? And again, being conscious of his duty, and the nobility of it through the teaching of Christ, he confessed his discipleship in the divine virtue. For he who denies anything, either denies it because he condemns the thing itself, or he shrinks from confession because he is conscious of his own unworthiness or alienation from it; neither of which cases is that of the true Christian. And when Urbicus ordered him to be led away to punishment, one Lucius, who was also himself a Christian, seeing the unreasonable judgment that had thus been given, said to Urbicus: "What is the ground of this judgment? Why have you punished this man, not as an adulterer, nor fornicator, nor murderer, nor thief, nor robber, nor convicted of any crime at all, but who has only confessed that he is called by the name of Christian? This judgment of yours, O Urbicus, does not become the Emperor Pius, nor the philosopher, the son of Caesar, nor the sacred senate." And he said nothing else in answer to Lucius than this: "You also seem to me to be such an one." And when Lucius answered, "Most certainly I am," he again ordered him also to be led away. And he professed his thanks, knowing that he was delivered from such wicked rulers, and was going to the Father and King of the heavens. And still a third having come forward, was condemned to be punished.
