

Luke 12:49-53 - "Division as a Curse/as a Blessing"

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Based on our readings for today, I would like us to consider the difference between division as a curse and division as a blessing. Because of the sinful nature we're born with, we are a divided people. Such division caused by sin is a curse since it divides us from God and His Word, from each other, and ultimately (if left unchecked) from life itself. Yet Jesus said in our Gospel reading that He came not to bring peace on earth, "*but rather division.*" Jesus is talking here not about division as a curse but division as a blessing. When is division a blessing? When God deals with the division caused by sin through His Son.

Actually, there are basically two ways of dealing with division caused by sin, God's way and the devil's way. Let's first consider one of the ways the devil tempts us to deal with division, and that's to say, like the false prophets in Jeremiah's day, that the division caused by sin is a good thing; to say "*to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you.'*" This method is popular in our world, and even in parts of the church today. It slithers in under the disguise of tolerance. Certainly there are some things in this world that God wants us to tolerate or endure, like suffering for the sake of the Gospel, but one thing God does not want us to tolerate in our lives is sin, including the sin of false teaching.

Years ago, when I was a pastor in the Denver area, one of the main newspapers at the time, the Rocky Mountain News, ran an article in the opinion section entitled "Doctrines may vary, but tolerance is the real truth." In this article a man, who called himself a Christian, described the struggle he experienced as a youth with Jesus' words, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6). This man wrote: "I couldn't stand the idea that every non-Christian in the world was going to hell. It seemed so unfair." What was this man's solution? He rejected God's way and came up with what he thought was his own way, which is really one of the devil's ways. "I now believe," he wrote, "that every religion worships the same God. They have different rules and different ideas and different names for the spiritual entity who guides them, but ultimately, all religions are aimed in the same direction...That's why I feel so strongly," he concludes, "that we must have tolerance for all beliefs." Tolerance in this sense tries to get rid of our sinful divisions by saying (contrary to God's Word) that they're not sinful—that all people believe in the same God and will end up in heaven.

How does God feel about such a tolerance toward different "ideas" or teachings about God or salvation, whether they come from a Christian, a non-Christian, or even from an angel? God tells us through St. Paul, "*Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed*" (Galatians 1:8; 2 Peter 2:1-2). All teaching that is contrary to God's Word is ultimately from the devil, and should not be tolerated but condemned. For, as the LORD said in our OT reading from Jeremiah (23:28), "*What has straw in common with wheat?*"

Actually straw and wheat do have some things in common. They are part of the same plant until the time of harvest. That's when the grains of wheat are divided from it's dry stalk. The dry stalk, or straw, while it may be good for animal bedding and mucking out their stalls, it has nothing in common with the nourishment provided by the grains of wheat.

Something similar is true when it comes to words of false teaching, and God's word of truth. False teaching while it may, like straw, provide some temporary comfort in this life, in the end it's good for nothing but to be thrown on the manure pile. When, however, we speak the word of God, God is at work feeding us and others with the bread of life, Jesus Christ.

That brings us to God's way of dealing with division caused by sin, which is a blessing. God would, of course, prefer that there were no sinful divisions between any of us. But He doesn't get rid of those divisions by tolerating sin in an accepting way, like the man mentioned earlier; by changing what His Word says is right and wrong, true and false. If He could, the Son of God wouldn't have had to become a man in Jesus Christ so that He could free us from our sins through His suffering and damning death on the cross in our place; for our sins.

In our OT reading from Jeremiah God says that His Word is "*like fire...like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces.*" The Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, refers to Himself and His work in a similar way. "*I came to cast fire on the earth...[to bring] division*"—division between what is sinful and what is holy. Thank the Lord that He accomplished this division not by breaking **us** in pieces, but by taking all people's sins upon Himself and allowing Himself to be hammered to a cross and broken to pieces, along with our sins. By doing so Jesus made it possible for us to be divided from our sins, not by changing the definition of sin or saying that sinful division is a good thing, but by repenting of sin and trusting in Christ's work on and off the cross—His death and resurrection—to forgive our sins.

What does this mean when it comes to our relations with other sinners like ourselves? Like Christ, we are called to hate sin but love sinners. Love according to God's definition includes the cross. God tells us in our Epistle reading to "*consider Him who endured [tolerated] from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted*"—so that you may not give in to simply telling people what they want to hear.

Tolerance in this sense does not change what God's word says about sin and false teaching, but tolerates or endures the troubles that sin and false teaching causes in this life so that we can "*speak [God's] word faithfully*" to others (including those in our families and church). Acknowledging such division between what's right and wrong—what's true and what's false based on God's Word, won't make us popular in the eyes of the world, but God forbid that this should ever be our goal. Instead, telling others what God's Word says is right and wrong/true and false may result in being persecuted and even put to death, like Jesus Christ and countless Christian martyrs in the past and today.

Such persecution can tempt us to conceal our faith instead of confessing it. But if we are truly concerned about those in other parts of the world and in our own families and neighborhoods who reject God's Word, then don't choose Satan's way which tolerates in an accepting way sinful beliefs and behavior. Instead of feeding others the straw of false teaching which accepts their sinful ways and offers temporary comfort, feed them with the eternal comfort that comes from the bread of eternal life—Jesus Christ and His word of truth. Only then will the Spirit of God use what we say to bring others to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, enabling them to be divided from sin, death and the devil, and reunited with God, which is a blessing. All glory be to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Children's Sermon] First I want to talk about some bad things that separate us from each other? Let's pretend you're fighting with you sister. One of the things your parents may do is divide or separate you from each other, maybe by sending you each to your own bedroom. Let's pretend that you have COVID. You stand over here so that you don't share you germs with others. Bad things like these can divide us.

Now let's talk about a couple things God tells us in the Bible that gets us back together. How many of you are perfect and never do anything bad? How many of you are sorry for the bad things you do, and believe that Jesus died on the cross to set you free from your sins, death and the devil? This is how God brings us back together as His family through faith in His Word about our sins and about our Savior from sin, Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately some people want to keep on doing bad things, so they don't believe what God tells us in the Bible about how sin divides/separates us from God and each other, or about Jesus as their Savior. So, do we give up on them? No. Jesus doesn't give up on us in this life. So we show them Jesus' love by praying for them, and continuing to tell them about Jesus. "*We love because He first loved us*" (1 John 4:19).