

HE DIDN'T COME TO BRING PEACE?**LUKE 12:49-53; MATTHEW 10:34-36**

Here's a partial list of famous, influential world leaders. Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus doesn't seem to fit into that particular list of leaders, does He? Yes, the other men were leaders and had influence, but not in the same way as Jesus. They were violent, power-hungry, wagers of war, responsible for the death of thousands if not millions. But Jesus was peaceful, loving, and compassionate. It's wrong to put Him in that list unless there's an element to His life and ministry we tend to neglect.

From now through the end of June, we're considering several hard sayings that came out of Jesus' mouth. Jesus got into trouble repeatedly for what He said and did. He was deliberately provocative and controversial. If you've never been troubled or confused by something Jesus said or did, it's because you've never actually read the Gospels. It's inevitable we will come upon some aspects of Jesus' words and actions that makes us feel uncomfortable. That's as it should be because Jesus is all about challenging some of our ingrained beliefs, attitudes, and behavior in life. Being a follower of Jesus is always about personal change and transformation.

Let's reflect today on two similar statements Jesus made. Why are these words of Jesus offensive? Well, we just don't associate Jesus with war, conflict, and lack of harmony between people. Instead, we usually associate Jesus with peace, with people coming together, with the end of war, strife, and conflict of all kinds. After all, didn't the angels sing at Jesus' birth, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased"? (Lk. 2:14 NLT) But Jesus' words in the passages we just read make it sound like Jesus' actual mission was to cause division, conflict, and even war. He came to bring a sword? Really? We're left asking the question, "So, Jesus didn't come to bring peace after all?" So, is there an explanation that increases our understanding? Here's the most important question to answer. What's the application to my life as I try to follow Jesus? What personal beliefs, attitudes, or behavior need to be changed in my life if I live out the truth embedded in Jesus' words? Let's acknowledge, first of all, that...

AN INEVITABLE EFFECT OF JESUS' MISSION IS CONFLICT.

Let's get an all-important truth out there quickly and clearly. Jesus liked to say things in a memorable way. Even though it might sound like it at first glance, He never said here conflict was the purpose of His mission, but He made it very clear conflict was an inevitable effect of His mission. In other words, it was a predictable product or result of His mission. Or to put it another way, conflict was one effect of His coming to this planet, but it wasn't the purpose of His coming. It's interesting and important that He admitted right here that His mission caused tension within Himself. Not conflict. Jesus was never in conflict with His Father, but He lived a good part of His earthly life with full knowledge of what His Father's will meant for Him personally. That created an ongoing burden or tension within Jesus. He said, "I have a terrible baptism of suffering ahead of me, and I am under a heavy burden until it is accomplished." (Lk. 12:51 NLT) No

doubt Jesus always enjoyed spiritual peace in terms of His relationship with His Father, but He admitted here that the spiritual, emotional, and physical suffering He was going to endure before and on the cross was something that weighed on Him heavily. He encountered the dread of it every day. We're tempted to think of Jesus as this kind of serene, anxiety-free, "don't worry, be happy" personality. I think here Jesus pulled back the curtain of His own inner life just a bit and we get a very different picture indeed.

I believe that also gives us insight into Jesus' statement, "I have come to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already burning!" (Lk. 12:49 NLT) When the word "fire" is used like that in the Bible, it means judgment. Jesus already knew He was going to become the object of God's judgment for the sins of human beings when He hung upon the cross. He was going to take God's judgment upon Himself. He also recognized that for His Kingdom to come in all of its glory and power, it will mean the inevitable division of those who follow Him and those who reject Him. It was and is an inevitable outcome of His mission. He wanted to get on with it and get it over with. It was as if Jesus said, "Let's get through all the negative parts of My mission – the sufferings of the cross, the inevitable judgment - so we can get to the positive parts!"

An inevitable effect of Jesus' mission is conflict. You don't have to be Jesus' follower very long to realize His mission causes conflict with my culture. The Bible says, "Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God." (Jm. 4:4 NLT) When the Bible uses the word "world" like that it doesn't mean the physical planet which is God's beautiful creation, but instead the values, the attitudes, and the behavior of people who have no use for God in their lives. When you become a follower of Jesus, your worldview will be altered and how you relate to the culture you live in will change. You are called to love the world's people – far from God as they may be – but not their values, attitudes, or behavior. The Bible says, "Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity." (1 Jo. 2:15-17 MSG)

Several years ago NBC added Veggie Tales—a popular and thoroughly Christian cartoon—to its Saturday morning lineup. But Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber got edited, as many of the pertinent references to God and Scripture were deleted from each episode. Initially, NBC stated that the cuts were simply a way to fit each episode into a tight, 23-minute slot. But it soon became clear that there was more to the story. After being pressured from several organizations to explain its editing out of biblical content, NBC released the following statement: "NBC is committed to the positive messages and universal values of Veggie Tales. Our goal is to reach as broad an audience as possible with these positive messages, while being careful not to advocate any one religious point of view." Phil Vischer, the co-creator of Veggie Tales, expressed deep disappointment in the edits. "It's a mistake to pitch Veggie Tales as just values," he said, "because fundamentally it's about God." Another commentator observed,

"Today, no one in network TV fears what children are watching—unless it makes them think about God." Jesus' mission causes conflict with my culture.

Jesus' mission causes conflict among people. Jesus Himself experienced that reality. Here's how people reacted to Jesus. "There was a lot of grumbling about him among the crowds. Some argued, 'He's a good man,' but others said, 'He's nothing but a fraud who deceives the people'.... So the crowd was divided about him." (Jo. 7:12-13, 43 NLT) It's the same today. Back then and now, people will always be divided into those who accept Jesus for who He is and what He's done and those who have not. The mission and message of Jesus always produces a very clear division. People are separated by reason of their response to Him. You either surrender to His claims that you desperately need a savior and only He can be your Savior as well as His right to absolute Lordship over your life or you don't. Many of us here today find ourselves at odds now with those with whom we used to associate. The problem was and is Jesus. Jesus recognized that His coming would usher in controversy, disruption, and division among human beings - not necessarily peace, harmony, and tranquility.

In 1927, the famous English poet and essayist T.S. Eliot became a Christian and was baptized and confirmed. Prior to his conversion, Eliot belonged to London's Bloomsbury Group, a small, informal association of artists and intellectuals who lived and worked in the Bloomsbury area of London. When news of Eliot's conversion hit the news, the Bloomsbury Group responded with shock and even disgust. The writer Virginia Woolf, the de facto leader of the group, penned the following letter to one of her peers: "I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become a [believer] in God and immortality, and he goes to church. I was shocked." Some people are going to say good-bye to you forever if you welcome Jesus into your life.

Perhaps most painful of all, Jesus' mission causes conflict even within families. Jesus was explicit about that fact right here. He quoted the Old Testament prophet, Micah, in making the point that people in families would disagree on the significance of His life and ministry. "From now on, when you find five in a house, it will be—Three against two, and two against three; father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against bride, and bride against mother-in-law." (Lk. 12:53 MSG) Again, Jesus experienced this conflict personally. Scripture tells us His own brothers did not believe in Jesus until after His resurrection. The earliest Christians faced this reality, also. Paul, the great Christian leader, gave advice to new believers whose spouses did not become followers of Jesus. Of course, they should stay married if at all possible. But sometimes allegiance to Jesus caused major problems. He wrote, "But if the husband or wife who isn't a believer insists on leaving, let them go. In such cases the believing husband or wife is no longer bound to the other, for God has called you to live in peace." (1 Cor. 7:15 NLT)

That reality is still true today. Sometimes a decision to follow Jesus can end a marriage or break up a relationship with a parent or a child. We don't have as much of that here in our country, but just ask someone from an orthodox Jewish family, or a Hindu family,

or a Muslim family about the impact of following Jesus on family dynamics and you'll often get a new insight into the cost of being His follower. And sometimes a decision to obey Jesus' calling can result in tremendous strain even in families where everyone claims to be following Jesus! Here's a true story. A couple in suburban Washington, D.C., approached their pastor asking him to help their college student daughter, who felt a calling to be an overseas missionary. "That's wonderful!" said the pastor. "Oh no, you misunderstand," said the parents. "We want you to help us talk her out of ruining her life." Jesus said it would happen, "Well-meaning family members can be your worst enemies." (Mt. 10:36 MSG) Following Jesus causes conflict.

So, here's the application question you and I need to answer. Are you willing and prepared to endure conflict as Jesus' follower? When Jesus said, "Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword," (Mt. 10:34 NLT) He wasn't being literal. He was thinking of conflict, controversy, and division as a sword that cuts and causes pain. He wanted His followers back then and now to know in advance one inevitable effect of being His follower is conflict. When it comes, don't be surprised. Don't be caught off guard. Don't say you didn't know this was part and parcel of being Jesus' follower. I like what pastor and author, Kent Edwards, wrote, "Jesus is the great polarizer. It's as if all of humanity were iron filings laid out on a sheet of paper, and Jesus is the magnet. Every single filing lines up either with the North Pole or the South Pole. Every person is either attracted to or repelled by the person of Jesus Christ, because he's a magnet. The power and influence of his very being cannot be ignored." When you encounter Jesus and His claims, you're confronted with the choice whether to accept Him and His Lordship or to reject Him. Loyalty and allegiance to Jesus must take precedence over any and every other earthly obligation or relationship. Are you prepared to count even precious relationships with people you love as loss for the supreme prize of following Jesus? But in all of this conversation about conflict, let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater! Isn't there some kind of relationship between Jesus and peace? Oh, indeed there is! We need to remember today that...

AN ULTIMATE RESULT OF JESUS' MISSION IS PEACE.

Can we reconcile these two different pictures of Jesus: as both a peace-giver and a conflict-starter? Of course. Absolutely. It's just that before God's peace conquers all, realize, face the fact, and don't be surprised by conflicts, controversies, divisions, and wars, so to speak. Without any doubt, Jesus' mission results in peace with God. The Bible says, "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us." (Rom. 5:1 NLT) Jesus came to bring peace between God and human beings. His mission was one of being reconciled to God not being condemned by God. Without Jesus' successful mission, all of humanity would be at war with God today whether we'd be aware of it or not. You and I would walk through life lost in the tangle of our own selfishness and desires. Our lives would lack any true purpose. Death would mean only eternal separation from God and damnation to Hell. But because of what Jesus accomplished at the cross and the empty tomb, we can live every day knowing God has accepted us fully and forever because of what Jesus has done for us.

As followers of Jesus, His mission becomes our mission. The Bible says, “God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5:18-19 NLT) Reconciliation is all about peace. Jesus spoke passionately here about His mission. He was distressed and burdened until it was accomplished. The more we connect with Jesus, the more we connect with His mission. It increasingly stirs us up. It’s something about which we feel ultimate passion. The more we identify with Jesus’ mission, the more we want God to use us to help end the war human beings wage against our gracious and loving Father. Nothing brings us greater joy than to see someone we know personally end his or her rebellion and find a new, peaceful relationship with the God of the universe.

Jesus’ mission will also result in peace among people. Absolutely. Jesus never advocated conflict. He taught us not to resist or retaliate if we get attacked or are ill-treated. He said, “God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.” (Mt. 5:9 NLT) Because God is indeed the God of peace, those who seek peace in personal relationships and pursue it reflect His character. When the Holy Spirit is in charge, peace is always the outcome. One of the disciples was Matthew who was a tax collector before he began to follow Jesus. He was a willing accomplice to Roman rule of Israel. Another disciple was known as Simon the Zealot which meant he’d been part of a radical Jewish group committed to the violent overthrow of Roman rule in Israel. Those two men would not and could not have been in the same room together ordinarily. What made the difference? The presence of Jesus.

One of the major issues among the first Christians was the relationship between Gentile and Jewish Christians. Racial hatred ruled before their conversion. But now they worshiped, evangelized, and served God together. What made the difference? The presence of Jesus. The Bible puts it like this, “For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.... He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups.” (Eph. 2:14,18 NLT) Jesus has been doing that same kind of reconciling work in our country between black and white Christians thanks to the visionary ministry of people like Martin Luther King, Jr. He was killed 50 years ago this month. Isn’t it ironic that the people who work hardest for peace are so often cut down by violence? He rightly observed that 11 o’clock on Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in America. I look around here on a Sunday morning and I’m grateful that we can be a church where people of every color, every ethnicity, and every nationality can come together to worship, evangelize, and serve God. What makes the difference? The presence of Jesus.

Jesus’ mission also results in the peace of God. Don’t ever forget what Jesus said to you, me, and every one of His followers. “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don’t be troubled or afraid.” (Jo. 14:27 NLT) Why not be troubled or afraid? Because Jesus also said, “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.” (Jo.

16:33 NLT) Yes, we will still have bad days, sad days, and anxious days. But we don't have to live there. We don't have to become its slave. Jesus will have the last word in my life and yours. That's His solemn promise. As a result, the Bible says, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." (Ph. 4:6-7 NLT) An ultimate result of Jesus' mission is peace.

A woman by the name of Nancy Kennedy has written about her (not so) terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year. Let me explain. Starting with an open heart and quadruple bypass surgery, her husband, Barry, had endured surgery after surgery over 15 months. Nancy had been in more waiting rooms than she could count on one hand. In little more than a year's time, Nancy's vocabulary had increased to include words and phrases such as aneurysm, atrial fib, and EP study with ablation. They all meant she had to put on a cheery face, kiss Barry good-bye, and promise she wouldn't worry about him, remember to eat lunch, and not forget to lock the garage door at night while he was in the hospital again. With all Barry's surgeries and procedures, Nancy and he had one of the worst years in their 32 years together.

Yet, ironically, it also turned out to be the best year. Nancy learned just how deeply Barry loved her. As he was all prepped and waiting to go into surgery to repair his aortic aneurysm, Barry looked at Nancy's friend, Tara, who was waiting with them, and said, "Make sure Nancy takes care of herself. Promise me, or else I'll worry." He wasn't worried about being sliced open again—he was worried about Nancy. Nancy came to faith in Jesus three years after Barry and she got married. For almost 30 years she prayed about her husband's relationship with the Lord. Then, on the day of Barry's open-heart surgery, he told Nancy if he died, she'd see him again, because he knew Jesus was now his Savior, too. Barry prayed all the time now. He prayed with Nancy every day. He prayed with his friends. He even prayed with his surgeon.

What Nancy had asked God for all those years—to heal the spiritual rift in her marriage and to bring her husband and her close—God had given. Barry and Nancy talk often about that year, how it had been both awful and awfully good. They wouldn't wish that kind of year on anyone and wouldn't want to go through it again, but they're glad it happened. They thank God for the good days and the bad, because in all their days God's held them both securely in His grip. They'd had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year—and they praised God for it. Why? Because through it all they've known God's incredible kindness and His peace. True enough, an inevitable effect of Jesus' mission is conflict. But the bigger truth is that an inevitable result of Jesus' mission is peace. Peace not as the world gives. Peace that exceeds anything we can understand. Peace that guards our hearts and minds as we live out our lives in Christ Jesus.