

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Giving thanks to God for His Word

Take your Bible, and hold it while you give thanks to God for His Word. Turn to one of your favourite passages and give thanks to God for what this means to you.

For myself

I offer You my love and my commitment, Lord Jesus. You have blessed me when I do not deserve it, You have healed my heart when I have been in despair, You have given me hope when I have lost my way, and You have saved me when I have gone my own way. I do not know how You can do these things, but I know that You have done them for me because they are the truth that I experience. **Halleluiah!**

For others

Pray for criminals who have been sentenced to death, anywhere in the world. Remember that some will be guilty and some will be innocent, and pray for those who bear the awful task of doing what society requires of them; to kill people.

Meditation

The politician organises and controls the world.
But Christ perceives the true path of history;
And He knows already what will happen to human plans.

The economist gives advice and financial projection.
But Christ knows the real value of everything;
And He holds the future of the markets in His hands.

The entrepreneur seeks every chance to create wealth.
But Christ is the source of all good in the world;
And He rejoices to give away everything He has!

The celebrity believes fame will deliver true happiness.
But Christ alone can give the soul true joy;
And He delights to make His offer to all.

The impact of 'great' people within this world of ours,
Must be measured against Christ, the greatest,
And the glory of Him who has saved us in love.

Bible Passage

Luke 12:49-59

⁴⁹ Jesus said,

*"I came to bring fire to the earth,
and how I wish it was already kindled!
⁵⁰ I have a baptism with which to be baptized,
and how troubled I am until it is completed!
⁵¹ Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth?
No, I tell you, but rather strife!
⁵² From now on, a household of five will be divided
three against two and two against three.
⁵³ They 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."*

⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds,

*"When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say straight away, 'It's going to rain'; and this is what happens. ⁵⁵ Then when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'It's going to be hot'; and it is. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to read the earth and sky, so why are you not able to read the signs of the time?
⁵⁷ Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? ⁵⁸ So, when you go to court with your adversary, try to settle the case before you get there, or you may be forced before the judge, who may turn you over to the officer of the law, who will throw you in prison. ⁵⁹ I warn you, you won't get out until you have paid every last penny."*

Review

Yesterday's passage was challenging, because Jesus told the disciples plainly that God expected them to do the work He had commissioned, and if they did not, the consequences would be dire. His message reminds us that Christian faith is not a matter of practicing a religion that suits us, or panders to our own convenience and preference. It is a matter of responding fully to the truth about God, having faith in His Messiah and doing what He requires of us. God has saved us not so that we may have a good life, but so that we may take part in His work of redemption. We live at a time when the Spirit of God is working in power in our midst, and the Lord wants us to be proactive and engaged with great endeavour. He has given us a great deal and requires much from us (12:48).

All of this lies behind what Jesus says here in our passage today. He speaks firstly to the disciples about the nature of God's work on earth and His own role in it, saying that it is more like war than peace (12:49-50), and that it will create division amongst people (12:51-53). Secondly Jesus turns to the crowds still following Him (12:54) and calls on them to read the signs of God's work all around them (12:55,56), and delivers an extraordinary parable (12:57-

59) emphasising the urgency of what God is doing. Jesus urges people to get right with God or face the consequences (12:59), and he reminds us that the time is coming when God will judge whether His people have done what He requires.

You will notice that the first five verses of this passage have been written out in a 'poetic' style, with a series of brief lines, mostly paired. In English, this passage does not obviously read like poetry, but I assure you that the original is indeed written in a form of ancient poetry style. Yes, Jesus appears to have given some of His teaching in poetry made out of rhythmic, if not rhyming, lines! Certainly, the whole teaching comes to life when we read it as poetry, with many of the lines showing the classic 'Hebrew' poetic form of repeated or paired lines, designed to enhance our understanding of the points made.

Jesus starts by speaking boldly about His own desire to fulfil the work God has called Him to do. He describes this as a 'fire' that He has come to bring 'on the earth' (12:49) but what does Jesus mean by this? Fire has a special place in Scripture as a description both of God's presence and of His righteous justice. This is highlighted in the book of Exodus, where we read that God was present with His people in the 'fire' that led them through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21, 40:38). The prophet Malachi also describes God's righteous judgement as like a burning fire that purifies humanity (Malachi 3:2).

But Jesus then talks about His work as a 'baptism' that was yet to be 'completed' (12:50). Again, what does this mean? Jesus has already been baptised by John, so we can only conclude that Jesus uses the idea of baptism to describe not just the start of His ministry but its completion on the Cross. This idea is something Paul takes up in his letters, when he says that believers are people who are 'baptised into Christ Jesus ... baptised into His death ...' (Romans 6:3f.). Baptism is therefore something more than a means of entry into the church; it also means being immersed completely in doing God's will.

The next saying of Jesus is difficult; He says that He has not come to bring 'peace', but 'strife' and 'division' (12:51,52). But surely, we say, Jesus came to bring peace on earth, for this is what the angels sang at His birth (Luke 2:14)! But while Jesus did indeed bring peace between God and people through His work of salvation on the Cross, the Gospel message itself does not bring peace and never has done. It calls on people to respond to God one way or the other and therefore necessarily brings division, as Jesus says, even within households (12:53). No one should imagine that the Christian message is any less divisive today. Its message brings us peace with God, but those who do not want this message will reject it.

Jesus is concerned about those who reject His message, and turns to the crowds who have followed Him to rebuke them for not responding to the Gospel (12:54-56). He has performed deeds in front of them that were prophesied to be the works of God's Messiah (11:29f.), but He bewails the inability of people to interpret His work. They have no difficulty interpreting the weather, so why can they not perceive God at work before their eyes? He longs for His own people, the people of Israel, to respond to what He is doing and accept God's salvation. But in general they do not, that is, apart from the band of people following Him. Tragically, but accurately, He call them 'hypocrites' (12:56); that is, people who love religion but will not accept the truth about God.

So Jesus calls out to the crowds, urging them to do more than just observe Him. He says, 'why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?' (12:57). In the parable that follows (12:58,59), Jesus describes the people as like those who go to court without really knowing what they are doing or understanding the consequences of their actions. He urges them to sort themselves out and 'make peace' before it is too late; it is a simple illustration, and he wants those who hear Him to make their peace with God. Although we are only half way through Luke's Gospel, His urgent concern is that the people around Him are not really accepting the evidence He has provided that God is at work in their midst.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V51 'No, but rather strife'

Other translations:

'No, I tell you, but division' (NIV)

'No, I tell you but rather division' (NRSV)

Nearly every Bible version translates the last word as 'division'. The Greek word here means, 'division, opposition or dissention; the opposite of peace'. Now the rest of the passage speaks of the division of families (12:52f.) and this is why the translation 'division' is favoured by many. However, I feel that the sentence in verse 51 demands that we translate 'strife', as the exact opposite of 'peace'. This helps our interpretation of the passage, which starts in this verse with a principle and then move on to describe how this works out in the next verse (see study).

V56 'read ... read the signs'

Other translations:

'interpret the appearance ... interpret' (NIV)

'interpret the weather signs ... interpret' (NRSV)

It is strictly correct to translate using the word 'interpret' here, but we do not commonly speak of interpreting the earth, the sky or the time. The word we use to express this in English is different. We speak of 'reading' these natural phenomena as well as the 'signs of the time', hence my translation.

V57 'adversary'

Other translations:

'opponent' (NAS)

'accuser' (NRSV)

The different translations reflect the range of words that can be used to translate the Greek 'antidokou' which describes an enemy at court. It is the word that most naturally translates the Hebrew word 'satan', meaning 'accuser', as found most prominently in the book of Job (Job 1,2). By the time of Christ the word 'satan' had become a proper noun referring to the devil, or Satan, and it was not therefore used any more for its original meaning, which was 'someone who opposes in court'.

Discipleship

Application

Responding to God

Throughout this passage, Jesus is concerned about the ultimate fate of those around Him who are simply not responding to God. They are religiously conditioned to see God in certain ways and cannot see Him in the simplest of good deeds, of His preaching that the Kingdom is near, in His healing and deliverance, and so much more. The whole passage is an appeal to religious people to respond to the truth about God who is working in their midst.

This same message is relevant for today. Too often, Christians become comfortable in their faith and believe that unless the practices with which they are familiar today continue, then all is lost. I can hardly believe it, but after a lifetime in the church, during which the subject of seats in church has become a matter of humour to most Christians, I have today heard stories about people who have left churches because pews were replaced by chairs! It is utterly unbelievable! Are we still so hypocritical? How is it that Christian people become so angry and motivated by such things, and why do we not vest such mental and spiritual energy in the work of the Gospel?

Ideas for what to do

- Think carefully about the problems within your own wider family created by the division between those who believe in God and those who do not. What do you think can be done to overcome such divisions, if anything?
- Pray for those who find it hard to make decisions about following Christ

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do you think was going on in Jesus' mind as He spoke these words to the disciples and to the crowds?
2. How does the message of the Gospel divide people today? Is it possible to heal some of the divisions?
3. What signs is God doing in our midst today, and do people understand them today?

Final Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the wonderful way that You have helped us come to know the Father. Thank You that You came to this world and lived amongst us and taught us, and thank You for dying for us on the Cross. We can hardly express our wonder and admiration for what You have done, but we are truly grateful. AMEN
