

Luke 12:50-53;14:26, Mark 3:33-35—Division or Peace?

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In Luke 12:49, Jesus said that He came to cast fire upon the earth. By this He meant that all those who did not believe in Him and refused His atoning work on the cross would be judged. Then He made another shocking statement in Luke 12:51 that He came to bring division and not peace. Wait a minute, I thought Jesus was all about peace. Then in Luke 12:52-53, He said families would be split up and be against each other. I believe what He meant was that Jesus would bring peace between God and all people who received Him as their Savior, but concerning Him there would be no peace between people. People must choose between Jesus and the world. Even in families there would be great division and strife over Jesus. The clearest example of this was first century Jerusalem. Right after Jesus' resurrection, thousands of Jews believed in Jesus as their Savior and Lord, but many of their families were outraged (Acts 2:37-41). In Acts 8:1, there was a great persecution against Jewish believers in Christ, and believers were arrested and even killed—therefore Jesus' prediction came true. Jesus did not come to tell people that all paths lead to God. He did not come to tell people that what you believe does not matter. He came to deliver a narrow restrictive truth that only Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to God the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). What was the greatest priority in Jesus' view, their earthly family or their spiritual family?

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus uttered some controversial words when He asked a crowd, "Who are My mother and My brothers? And looking about on His disciples who were sitting around Him, He said, 'Behold, My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother.'" (Mark 3:33-35). Jesus was responding to a message that His mother and brothers were outside and wanted Him to come out and go home with them. A very important previous passage explains why they were there. In Mark 3:21, we learn that His family had come to take custody of Him because they thought He had lost His mind. Mary knew that Jesus' birth was miraculous, and the angel had explained to her that Jesus was the promised Messiah. In John 2, at the beginning of His ministry she expected Him to do a miracle. Therefore, how is it possible that she could have thought He had lost His senses? Why would she try to inhibit His ministry?

All parents expect their son to work within the system. All parents want to protect their son from the danger of defying the government or the religious leadership. Every family tries to preserve the family reputation. At the same time that His family was there, the religious leaders were criticizing Jesus for His teaching, and His supposedly violating the Sabbath traditions in their law. After Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath in Mark 3:6, the Pharisees met with the Herodians to discuss how they might destroy Jesus. In Mark 3:22, the scribes were saying His miraculous works were done by the power of Satan. Clearly Jesus was operating outside the establishment, and He was severely opposed by the established authorities such that they were seeking to kill Him. Even though Mary knew He was the Messiah, she had some misconceptions about Jesus that would not be cleared up until after the resurrection. It is even clearer that His brothers were not believing in what Jesus was doing and saying. In John 7:5 it says, "For not even His brothers were believing in Him." Jesus Himself said in Mark 6:4 after his four brothers are listed, "A prophet is not without honor except in his home town and among His own relatives and in His own household."

In Mark 3:31-35, Jesus' disciples expect Him to jump up and run out to see what His family wants, but Jesus knows that they want to inhibit His ministry. Jesus takes that opportunity to teach His disciples that His spiritual family that hears the Word of God, believes it, and responds to it, has a priority over His earthly family. The family unit in first century Israel was even more close and important than ours is now. Typically the family members stayed together for life, working in the family business or on the family land. After the Exodus from Egypt, they came to Canaan where God divided up the land by tribes, and each family in the tribe got a piece of property that would be theirs forever passed down to each generation. Even if they sold it, it would come back to them in the year of Jubilee (Lev.25:10). The family was the basis of social and economic life, and the source of one's identity. The family was a person's life, but Jesus contended that life is not defined by biological family. Spiritual life requires a commitment to God according to the truth. Interestingly, in another passage (Luke 11:28), a woman tried to bless Jesus' mother, but Jesus corrected her by saying, "On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it." The physical family must conform to the higher priority of spiritual family. Jesus does not intend to repudiate the importance of the biological family so here is a tip---Don't Use This Passage on Mother's Day, but He was teaching the far more important issue of a person's relationship to Jesus.

Mistaken Identity

All these stories make a similar point that the established institutions of family and religion are mistaken about Jesus as to

who He is and what He came to do. Jesus was disassociating Himself from their authority. When the Pharisees were saying that he was violating the Sabbath law, Jesus told them that He was the Lord of the Sabbath. When His family tried to stop His ministry, Jesus said His spiritual family consists of those whose first allegiance is to do the will of God. His biological family opposed the will of God at that time w/o realizing it, and so became outsiders. Don't panic at this point because there is ample evidence that after His resurrection His family all became believers, and got in tune with the program of God. Mary always believed in Him, but she just got confused for the short time of His earthly ministry when he was operating outside the establishment and was in danger.

Dividing the Family

In related passages about family, Jesus actually taught that His teaching, and especially His crucifixion and resurrection, would bring divisions to many families. In Luke 12:50-53, Jesus said, "Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you no, but rather division; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two, and two against three." Jesus was saying that after His death and resurrection in Jerusalem, the people of the city would be divided up as thousands would believe the Gospel but the majority would not. Jesus came to bring peace between God and man for all those who would believe, but within many families, some would believe and others not. Therefore there would be a division within many families about who Jesus is. Concerning Jesus, decisions have to be made, there is no neutral ground. Families can disagree on politics or sports and still remain close, but they would not be able to disagree on Christ and remain as close as they were. Historically, after the resurrection, when the Christian movement gained momentum in Jerusalem, many families were divided. Parents told children, "If you forsake your traditional religion and follow Jesus, then we no longer have a son or a daughter." This is why Jesus was warning them to be prepared for the consequences, and why in parallel passages He said, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me...and He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me." (Matt.10:34-38). Our belief in and devotion to Jesus is such a priority it means life itself to us, and we may need to even sacrifice worldly relationships if given no other choice. Jesus came to bring peace between God and mankind, but not necessarily between people because they must choose between Jesus and the world. The decisions people make about Jesus may bring division and strife.

The Ultimate Shocker

If the previous passages didn't shake you up, hold onto your seats because in Luke 14:26, Jesus took the shock value to another level. He said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." Before we panic at the severity of this statement, let's look at the corresponding parables that Jesus told to illustrate His meaning. In Luke 14:28-35, Jesus told three parables to illustrate the importance of giving a total commitment to Jesus. We can't follow Him with a divided heart, we must be "all in". This is just what Elijah told the people of Israel in 1 Kings 18:21, "How long will you be divided between two opinions? If the Lord is God follow Him...but the people did not answer him a word." Human nature just wants its cake and to eat it too. People don't want to make such a commitment that Jesus was asking for.

Jesus told the parables that when you begin building a building you must be fully committed to finish it, or when a king starts a war, he better be ready to finish it, or salt that has no taste is worthless. Jesus also said here that to be His disciple you must be willing to give up your worldly possessions. This is not an order to give them away, but a willingness to put Him first. All this confirms His meaning about "hating" their family. In comparison to your love and commitment to Jesus, you should be willing to reject your family if necessary, as it was in many families in Jerusalem after the resurrection.

The Greek word used in Luke 14:26 translated hate in English is "miseo". My word study revealed that it was often used to express a severe comparison, and sometimes used to mean "reject". Therefore I believe Jesus was saying to His audience that in comparison to their love and commitment to Him, they should be willing to reject their family if they had to. Let's be clear about what Jesus did not mean. Jesus commanded us to "Honor your father and mother" in Mark 7:9-13. In Ephesians 5:25 Jesus commanded, "Husbands love your wives". Therefore Jesus could not have meant to hate your parents or spouse. What Jesus was saying was that our love for Him must be so great that our natural love for family pales in comparison. All other relationships must come second place to Jesus. The Greek word Jesus used for life when He said "hate your own life" in v. 26 is psuche which was used for the physical material body. Therefore He was saying you must be willing to give up your own agenda, your own goals, your ambitions, your pleasures, and your worldly stuff to pursue your relationship with Jesus.

Jesus knew His disciples were going to be greatly pressured by their families, their bosses, and the demands of pursuing all the things of this world. He was warning them (and us) to be prepared to fully commit, and make Him your highest priority. When you consider the magnitude of this all-important decision, don't forget His commitment to us. Don't forget that He gave up a perfect glorious existence in Heaven where He was being worshipped as God in order to enter this cess pool of a world where He was rejected, abused, humiliated, falsely accused, beaten, spit on, and died the worst kind of death ... all because He loved us and was fully committed to us.

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