

## “Jesus Was a Divisive Figure”

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Brian Watson

*Matthew 10:34–39*

<sup>34</sup> “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup> For I have come to turn

“ ‘a man against his father,  
a daughter against her mother,  
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—  
<sup>36</sup> a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’

<sup>37</sup> “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; <sup>38</sup> and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”<sup>1</sup>

Is Christianity a religion of peace? It depends how you look at things. Christianity is a religion that does not promote violence. The gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be spread through the sword. Jesus never told his followers to create their own form of government, or to create an army. He didn’t teach his followers to hurt their enemies. Instead, he commanded his disciples to love their enemies and pray for them. Yet Christianity acknowledges there will continue to be evil in this world until Jesus returns and creates a new world. So Jesus and his apostles taught that there is a legitimate role for government, and part of that role is to bear the sword, to punish evil.

Christianity is a religion that brings a certain kind of peace—peace between God and those who believe in him by believing in Jesus. Christians are people who have been reconciled to God through the work of Jesus. But Christianity is also a religion of division. It is polarizing. Some people believe in Christ, while many others reject him. And that has always been the case.

Today, there are many who reject Jesus outright. They want nothing to do with him. And there are many faithful Christians, too. I also find that there are people in between, people who call themselves Christians yet present a false view of Jesus, one who makes peace with everyone. I have heard it said that Jesus would not exclude anyone, or that Jesus built bridges with everyone. Those statements sound nice and honorable. The problem is they’re just not true. I

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quoted herein is taken from the New International Version (1984).

think they're not true because Jesus didn't include everyone without conditions. Those people who would be included among the people of God had to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus. They had to follow him. But human nature is such that not all people repent of sins and follow Jesus. Jesus knew that better than we do. He knew those who would be his people and those who would not. He knew those who would put their trust in him and those who would not. So he said he did not come to bring peace, but to bring a sword.

We find that statement in the passage that was just read, Matthew 10:34-39. Jesus did not come to bring peace to all, but only peace to those who would trust in him. Instead, he said he would bring a sword—not a real sword. Jesus, in his earthly ministry, did not cause any violence. So the sword here is metaphorical. He would bring division. And that line of division would run right through families. Some members of a family would believe in Jesus while others would not. Many of you have seen that in your own families. Some give their primary allegiance to Jesus. They love him even more than anyone else. And others reject Jesus. This is a difficult truth to accept. Of course, we don't know ultimately who will come to believe in Jesus and who won't. We continue to hope that people around us will believe. We continue to pray for their salvation and share the gospel with them.

Still, Jesus has a way of redefining the family. We see this in several passages in the New Testament. One of those passages is Mark 3:31-35:

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. <sup>32</sup> A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

<sup>33</sup> "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

<sup>34</sup> Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Now, I think Mary believed that Jesus was the Messiah. She knew, of course, of Jesus' miraculous conception, and she remembered the promises that were made to her by the angel Gabriel before Jesus was conceived. But Jesus' brothers didn't believe him prior to his death and resurrection. Yet the point that Jesus wanted to make is that he was creating a new family. Those who did the will of God—his followers—were his brothers and sisters. They were his new family.

What was it about Jesus that was so divisive? Why did some people believe in him and others not?

Two weeks ago, I taught that Jesus addressed sin. He revealed sin for what it is: evil works of darkness and idolatry. At another time, he told his brothers, “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil” (John 7:7). Think about that: the world hated Jesus—and continues to hate him—because he shows that it is evil. People continue to rebel against God, and when you tell them about Jesus and what he taught, and what his apostles taught, they are confronted with their own sin. We all are. Yet many do not want to be called sinners. They don’t want to be told that they are doing something wrong and that they have to change. Many of us like to stay the way we are.

Jesus also confronts us with authority. He taught and acted with supreme authority. As we’ll see later on, he is the ultimate authority. And when Jesus says he is Lord, or King, that means that we are not. We are not in control of everything. We are not our own master.

Yet that’s not a popular concept. A few years ago, a movie called *Invictus* came out. It was about a rugby team in South Africa that brought the nation together in the wake of apartheid. It starred Matt Damon and Morgan Freeman and it was directed by Clint Eastwood. The title of the movie comes from a poem, which was read in the movie (more than once, if I remember correctly). Here’s the poem, written by William Ernest Henley (1849-1903):

Out of the night that covers me,  
    Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
    For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
    I have not winced or cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
    My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
    Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
    Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not show strait the gate,  
    How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
    I am the captain of my soul.

That last line might motivate some, as it did in the movie. But if you stop and think about the poem for even a moment, one can see how anti-Christian it is. The narrator of this poem mentions “whatever gods.” But we can know the one true God, because we know Jesus. The narrator says that he has an “unconquerable soul.” Yet Jesus says the soul can be destroyed in hell (Matt. 10:28) and forfeited (Matt. 16:26). The narrator says it doesn’t matter how “strait” or narrow “the gate.” But Jesus says the gate is narrow (Matt. 7:14). And Jesus is the Master of everyone’s fate and everyone’s soul. Frankly, I think it’s absurd for any human being to make the claims made in that poem. We are not in charge of many things in our lives, and we are often not in control of how we die.

The idea that Jesus is in charge and that we’re not is unpopular. It confronts us. And that is one of the reasons why Jesus is divisive. Craig Blomberg, commenting on that passage in Matthew, writes, “His ministry proved so confrontational that he either attracted people to himself or visibly repelled them.”<sup>2</sup>

Another reason Jesus is unpopular is that he teaches about judgment. We’ll talk more about this in a few weeks, but the fact is that Jesus taught that the only way to avoid the wrath of God is to follow him. He is the only way to God and the only way to avoid hell. Yet many people think that God doesn’t judge, or that Jesus doesn’t judge, which is obviously contrary to what we read in the Bible.

Jesus taught that the world hated him. But he also taught that his followers would be hated by the world. So Christians today tend to be divisive, not because they try to create division, but because we follow Jesus. This is what Jesus taught in John 15:18-25:

<sup>18</sup> “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. <sup>19</sup> If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. <sup>20</sup> Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. <sup>21</sup> They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. <sup>22</sup> If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. <sup>23</sup> He who hates me hates my Father as well. <sup>24</sup> If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. <sup>25</sup> But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason.’

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 180.

Think about that: “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” If we never believed in Jesus, we would all be loved by “the world,” the realm of sinful humanity that is in rebellion against God. But those of us who believe in Jesus start to see the world in different ways. We believe different things about the purpose of life, about what is good and what is evil. We look at important issues like life, marriage, and sex differently. We view money and power in a different way. And when we share the gospel with people, we confront them with their sin. Even the softest gospel presentation must include the fact that all of us are sinners and that Jesus is the only savior.

Another reason why Jesus is divisive is that he taught that there are two types of people in the world. There are those who are children of God and there are some who are not. This is what Jesus indicates in John 8:42-47. To set the scene a bit, Jesus is in Jerusalem and he is having a discussion with the Jewish leaders there.

<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. <sup>43</sup> Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. <sup>44</sup> You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. <sup>45</sup> But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. <sup>46</sup> Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? <sup>47</sup> Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

The Jewish leaders believed they were children of Abraham and children of God. But Jesus tells them they are not. Instead, they are children of the devil, because they lie and they want to destroy Jesus. Satan is the father of all lies and murder, and his children copy him. Children of God, on the other hand, hear God’s words. They respond to what God says. As Jesus says in John 10:27, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” Real Christians respond to the Bible. Those who are not Christians reject the Bible.

John develops this idea, that there are children of God and children of Satan, in 1 John 3. Children of Satan are marked by their desire to sin. Children of God are marked by their love.

1 John 3:4–18 (NIV84)

<sup>4</sup> Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup> But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. <sup>6</sup> No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

<sup>7</sup> Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup> He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. <sup>9</sup> No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. <sup>10</sup> This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.

<sup>11</sup> This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. <sup>12</sup> Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. <sup>13</sup> Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. <sup>14</sup> We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. <sup>15</sup> Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

<sup>16</sup> This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. <sup>17</sup> If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? <sup>18</sup> Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

How, then, can one become a child of God? It is impossible for us on our own, but we can become children of God through the will of God.

John 1:10–13 (NIV84)

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Jesus was rejected by many, but he was received by some. Those who believed in him became children of God, not through human decision or a man's will, but through God's decision and God's will.

I think we find all of these ideas that I've been talking about in a famous passage regarding the "young rich ruler" who came to Jesus and asked how he could have eternal life.

Mark 10:17–31 (NIV84)

<sup>17</sup> As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

<sup>18</sup> “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

<sup>20</sup> “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

<sup>21</sup> Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

<sup>22</sup> At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

The problem with the rich young ruler is that he thought he could earn eternal life. He thought he had obeyed all the commandments. But the first commandment is, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). The young man didn’t realize that he had put all his possessions ahead of God. Jesus knew this, so he asked him to sell his possessions. (Jesus doesn’t ask all of us to sell everything. The point is that we must put nothing before him.)

The disciples were amazed. If a rich person—someone who was considered blessed by God and successful—couldn’t earn eternal life, who could? Jesus taught them that only with God can someone be granted eternal life. It is impossible for us to earn it, but God can grant it.

<sup>24</sup> The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

<sup>26</sup> The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

<sup>27</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

It is impossible for man to be saved apart from God’s work. And it seems very difficult to put God first, above everything else. But the disciples did this. They left their old lives to follow Jesus. Peter tells Jesus this.

<sup>28</sup> Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!”

<sup>29</sup>“I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel <sup>30</sup>will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. <sup>31</sup>But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Jesus promises us that if we leave our old lives behind, we won't lose anything. Whatever we lost, we gain in the church. No one who has left their old lives behind will fail to receive—in this age!—a new family, and all the blessings that come with a new family: brothers, sisters, children, homes, fields. But we will also face persecutions, too. This is part of what it means to follow Jesus. But it's worth it.

Jesus is divisive. He divides his people, the children of God, from everyone else. But following Jesus is worth it. He gives us forgiveness of sins so we can enter into a right relationship with God. He gives us eternal life. He gives us hope. Though we will face troubles and even persecutions, and though we will one day die, we will be with him in heaven. And when he returns to judge and to make all things new, he will recreate the universe. We will then live with him forever in a real, physical world that is purged of all its sin.