

“Peace on Earth?” (Luke 12:35–59)

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My wife’s favorite band is U2, who she’s seen play in concert several times. Four years ago, we both saw them play in Boston. In their 2000 album, *All That You Can’t Leave Behind*, there’s a song called “Peace on Earth.” It was written in response to a car bombing in Northern Ireland in 1998 that killed 29 people. The song begins with these words:

Heaven on earth,
We need it now.
I’m sick of all of this
Hanging around.
Sick of sorrow,
Sick of pain,
Sick of hearing, again and again,
That there's gonna be
Peace on earth.

In the wake of a terrorist attack that kills many innocent people, the idea that there will be peace on earth seems like a pipe dream or a bad joke.

Last week, we celebrated Jesus’ resurrection, when he rose victoriously from the grave. We sang hymns of hope in the face of death. And every Christmas, we hear and sing hymns that proclaim peace on earth. But in the face of ongoing suffering, sorrow, and conflict, it’s understandable why some people would doubt that peace on earth is something that can be achieved. In fact, it’s easy to understand why some people would hear those Christian hymns and wonder why there isn’t peace on earth if Jesus triumphed over sin and death.

In that same U2 song, Bono sings these lines:

Jesus, can you take the time
To throw a drowning man a line?
Peace on earth
To tell the ones who hear no sound
Whose sons are living in the ground?
Peace on earth

Jesus, in the song you wrote
The words are sticking in my throat:
“Peace on earth.”
Hear it every Christmas time,

But hope and history won't rhyme.
So, what's it worth,
This peace on earth?

Perhaps the reason why people think Jesus came to bring peace is because, in the King James Version of the Bible, when the angels tell the shepherds that Jesus is born, they say

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace,
Good will toward men (Luke 2:14 KJV).

And when Linus takes center stage each year and reads that verse, it sounds like Jesus came to bring peace on earth to all people. But only some later manuscripts of Luke's Gospel say "good will toward men." The translation we use here, the English Standard Version, says

"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"¹

That translation makes it clear that Jesus didn't come to bring peace to the whole world. Peace comes only to those who receive it, those with whom God is well pleased.

Everyone dreams of peace on earth. We want it. As Bono sang, we need heaven on earth. But not everyone sees that the true peace we need, first and foremost, is peace with God. Yes, we want freedom from wars and terrorist attacks. But even if all war and murders ended today, there wouldn't be ultimate peace. There would still be people at war with God. And since the reason why any of us lives and breathes is to know, love, and worship God, we won't be at peace until we've laid down our arms and come to embrace the peace offering that God has given to us. That's why we sing in one Christmas hymn, "Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!"² Unless everyone on earth finds peace in Jesus, there won't be peace. And since everyone doesn't embrace that peace offering, Jesus himself, it's true that when Jesus came, he brought division. And when Jesus returns in the future, he will divide all of humanity into two camps, those people who know, love, and trust him, and those who have rejected him, whether they have been outright hostile to him or whether they have simply been apathetic and indifferent to him.

We see this idea of division, not peace, in today's passage, which is Luke 12:35–59. We've been studying the Gospel of Luke for about a year now, and today we're finishing the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing."

first half twelve of its twenty-four chapters. In this part of Luke's biography of Jesus, we see that Jesus is in the midst of a great deal of teaching. He teaches his disciples what it means to be part of God's kingdom. Not everyone is part of that kingdom, and the fact that some come under the rule, reign, and blessing of Jesus and some don't means that there is division.

Let's now read Luke 12:35–40:

³⁵ “Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, ³⁶ and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. ³⁷ Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸ If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants! ³⁹ But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Over the last few chapters of Luke, Jesus has been teaching that there are people who reject him. He has twice predicted his imminent death (Luke 9:21–22, 44–45). He has “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51), where he knows he will die on a cross. He has told his disciples that some people will receive them, and that their peace will rest upon such people. But at the same time, he warned them that there would be some who don't receive their message of God and sinners reconciled (Luke 10:5–6).

Some of the people who reject Jesus are religious hypocrites, those who claim to know God but don't act like it (Luke 11:37–52). Jesus says a day is coming when people will be revealed for who they really are (Luke 12:1–3). And that day is when Jesus comes a second time, not as a humble baby laid in a manger, but as a glorious and conquering king.

Jesus knows that after he dies on the cross and rises from the grave, he will ascend to heaven. There will be a period—now going on two thousand years—between his ascension to heaven and his return to earth. We don't know when Jesus will return. But we're promised that day will come. And Jesus wants his followers to be ready.

Jesus tells his followers that they should be like servants who are awaiting their master to come home from a wedding feast. Wedding receptions in that time and place weren't just for a few hours; they could take days. So, servants wouldn't know when their master might return. Jesus tells his followers not to be lazy servants, not doing their jobs while the master is away.

Instead, they should be doing the things their master expects them to do. If that is the case, when the master comes, he will even serve them a feast!

But suppose the master comes in the middle of the night. In that time, Romans and Jewish people divided the hours of darkness into watches. The Romans divided that roughly twelve-hour span into four watches. Jews divided it into three. Either way, that time between the second and third watch would be in the middle of the night. Jesus is saying, “The master might come later than you expect, so don’t sleep.”

Of course, in this little story, the master is Jesus. He doesn’t mean that we should never sleep. But he means we shouldn’t be spiritually asleep. We shouldn’t say to ourselves, “Oh, I won’t come face to face with Jesus until I die, or until he returns, and since I have years left, I don’t have to worry about all that religion stuff. Yeah, I know how I’m supposed to live, but I’ll do that later. Now, I to focus a bit more on me.” Jesus is telling us to always be ready, to live as if he could return at any moment.

One powerful thing to think about is this: What are some things that you do that you would be embarrassed to be found doing when Jesus returns? What are some things that you do that you wouldn’t want to be caught doing? Or, to put it a different way, what are some things that you should be doing that you aren’t doing now? Would you want to be caught not doing your duty? Would you want to be caught slacking off while the boss is gone, instead of doing the job you’re getting paid for?

The Bible says that Jesus will come like a thief in the night (1 Thess. 5:1–2; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15). The point is not that Jesus is going to come secretly and tip-toe in; we’re also told that when Jesus comes, he will come “with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God” (1 Thess. 4:16). That’s hardly the sound of a secret coming. The point is that a thief doesn’t send you an announcement telling you when he’s going to break into the house. He doesn’t say, “At exactly 2:46 a.m. on such and such day, I will break into your house.” You don’t know when the thief might break in. Similarly, we don’t know when Jesus will return. While he’s in heaven, act like he’s right here with you, and live that way.

When one of the disciples hears this message, he wonders if it’s only for the twelve, or for a larger group. Does Jesus’ teaching apply to everyone, or only leaders within the Christian community? Let’s see how Jesus answers that question. We’ll read verses 41–48:

⁴¹ Peter said, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?” ⁴² And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? ⁴³ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁴ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁵ But if that servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, ⁴⁶ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. ⁴⁷ And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

Peter asks a sensible question: In that parable, who are the servants? Are they an inner ring of Jesus’ followers? Are they all Christians?

Jesus, in his typical fashion, doesn’t answer the question directly. Instead, he teaches another parable. He asks a rhetorical question: who is a faithful and wise manager? And he answers: I’ll you what he’s like, he’s the one who is doing the job his master gave him to do. Within the Roman Empire, some people had slaves. Slavery in the Roman Empire was not identical to slavery in America. That’s not to say it was great, and the Bible doesn’t say slavery is an ideal condition. But certain slaves had greater responsibilities, and some masters would put their estates in the care of a slave who served as a manager of that master’s household.

With that in mind, Jesus says, “Imagine that the master goes away. What if the slave he put over his household turns around and beats the other slaves and then sits around gorging himself and getting drunk, all while the master is gone? What do you think will happen if the master returns and finds his servant doing that?” Jesus says that the master would be right to cut such an evil and lazy servant into two. But there’s more: there are other servants, other slaves, who aren’t actively doing such evil things, but still aren’t doing the work that the master assigned to them. What will happen to them? Jesus says they will get a severe beating. But what if there are servants who didn’t understand what the master expected of them? Well, they should have known better, and therefore, they will still receive a light beating.

What does this mean? The master seems to represent Jesus, of course. But who are the servants? It seems like the manager could represent Christian leaders, pastors in particular. They are the ones who are managers over God’s household, who are supposed to give God’s people

“their portion of food at the proper time” by feeding them God’s word. Those who don’t do that will be treated accordingly. But it’s not just Christian leaders in view, because the other servants who weren’t doing their job are beaten. It’s hard to say whether all who are cut in two or beaten are condemned or not. The Bible does give us imagery of people being destroyed when they are cut off from God and cast into hell. For example, this is 2 Thessalonians 1:5–12, part of one of the apostle Paul’s letters to a church:

⁵ This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—
⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,
⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. ¹¹ To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, ¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, being cut in two may relate to condemnation. But it’s hard to know if the other servants are Christians who aren’t being very obedient and are being disciplined, or if Jesus’ parable also refers to non-Christians who also will receive punishment. And perhaps the point of the parable isn’t to press such details. The main point is that when Jesus returns—and, again, we don’t know when that will happen—everyone will receive what they deserve.

Now, we know from the rest of Scripture that those who are united to Jesus by faith will not be condemned (Rom. 8:1). If someone truly has faith in Jesus, they have been saved from condemnation by God’s grace, which is received by faith. None of this is our own doing. It is a gift, a priceless treasure that we don’t deserve and have not earned (Eph. 2:8–9). However, if we have been saved, we are supposed to do the work that God has prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:10). We are saved to serve God.

But there are many people who claim to be Christians and yet show no evidence of serving God. Jesus himself tells us that there are people who appear to be Christians and yet are not (Luke 8:4–15; Matt. 7:21–23). If people have been hypocrites, putting on a Christian mask but who haven’t actually been transformed by the grace of God, they will be condemned. Real

Christians who haven't been as obedient as they should will be disciplined, though it isn't quite clear exactly what this means (1 Cor. 3:12–15). And those who have heard about Jesus and have rejected him will be condemned. Rejection of Jesus can range from the hostile atheist to the indifferent apatheist, the person who hears about Jesus but is apathetic towards him. And what of the people who haven't heard explicitly about Jesus? The Bible tells us that we're all guilty of sin, that we all know there's a God who made the world and everything in it, and haven't acted rightly based even on that limited amount of knowledge. That's Paul's argument at the beginning of the book of Romans: everyone, whether Gentiles who didn't have God's written word or Jews that did, is guilty of sin. We hold out hope that those who can't understand that God made the universe and those who could never hear and understand the gospel, like infants and very young children and people with intellectual disabilities, will be saved. But the Bible speaks less clearly about such things.

The main point is that we are responsible for what we know. Everyone understands in some way that there is a God. Most people on earth have probably heard about Jesus. Many people have heard sermons, or at least portions of the Bible. God teaches us that we are responsible for what we know, and more is expected from those who have had more exposure to knowledge of God. Winston Churchill once said, "Where there is great power there is great responsibility." Or, as Uncle Ben says in *Spider-Man*, "With great power comes great responsibility." And the Bible says, more or less, "Where there is greater knowledge of God, there will be greater judgment." That's why not many should be teachers of the Bible, because those who teach God's word will be judged more harshly (James 3:1).

It may seem strange to think that there could be pastors who would be cut in two, which seems to mean they will be condemned. But not every pastor feeds his people the word of God. There are churches where pastors don't preach like this, reading the Bible and teaching what it means. There are times when a "pastor" gives a sermon that doesn't even quote one line from the Bible. I've heard a few of these. There are pastors that take passages out of context to make the Bible say what they want. There are pastors who use their position to gain power, popularity, and money. There's a relatively new Instagram account called "preachersnsneakers" that features pictures of pastors wearing sneakers and other items that cost hundreds of dollars. There are pictures of "pastors" like Steven Furtick, T.D. Jakes, and some others wearing sneakers and other clothing items that cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars. I had no idea that a pair of

sneakers could cost \$600 or more, but this Instagram account shows a picture of the “pastor” next to another picture of the item of clothing and what it costs.

I can’t claim to know where these pastors stand with Jesus. But I can say they’re not feeding the flock. Whether these pastors are trying to get rich and famous or whether they’re simply trying to build a nice, easy life, they are teaching people what their itching ears want to hear. They aren’t doing the job they’re called to do. And Jesus will deal with them accordingly.

But you don’t have to be a pastor to know that Jesus will deal with you. He will deal with everyone. So, how have we responded to him? Do we believe what the Bible says about Jesus? Do we personally love and trust Jesus? Are we living to serve him? If not, I urge you to turn to Jesus—perhaps for real this time. He will separate people into two camps. Only after all who are not united to Jesus have been cut off from this earth will there be true peace.

Now, let’s turn to the rest of today’s passage. I’ll read verses 49–59:

⁴⁹ “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵² For from now on in one house there will be five 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 her 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 at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

⁵⁷ “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? ⁵⁸ As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. ⁵⁹ I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.”

We see a few main points in these verses. The first one is that Jesus came to bring division, not peace. As I said earlier, Jesus will divide all people into two camps when he returns. At the end of history as we know it, there will be a division. But that division occurs now. People will either respond to Jesus positively or not. And that division occurs even in families. Some of us know this all too well. Though it hurts to see some of our loved ones reject the true Jesus, we

can never say that Jesus didn't tell us the truth. He promised there would be division, and we see this in the world.

Some people don't like this idea. There are many who teach about a "radically inclusive Jesus." Jesus does include people from all people groups, from all nations, tribes, and tongues. Men and women, old and young, people of different skin colors and socio-economic classes are included in the kingdom of God. People who committed outrageous sins and people who have committed everyday sins that we tend to overlook find forgiveness in Jesus. But not everyone enters the kingdom. There will always be a dividing line somewhere between people, at least as long as there is sin in the world. Today, that dividing line seems to be political. But the real dividing line is based on Jesus: you're either with him or against him.

The second point is that Jesus tells the people that they should realize who he is. People in Jesus' day knew how to read signs of weather. They couldn't tune into the Weather Channel or check an app on their phones. But if they saw clouds in the west, they knew those clouds were coming from the Mediterranean Sea, and that there would be rain. If the wind was blowing from the south, that was hot, desert air that would bring oppressive, scorching heat. Similarly, if they were familiar with the Old Testament at all, they should have recognized that Jesus was the Messiah or Christ, the anointed king, the son of David, the one prophesied in Scripture. Only those who were spiritually blind could fail to see that Jesus was the Promised One, the one who would make everything right, who would not only reign with justice and righteousness, but who would also die for the sins of his people.

That's what Jesus came to do. This talk of judgment and division sounds harsh. If you hear it out of context, it sounds like we're judged solely on our works. But that's not true. Christianity is a religion of truth and grace. It says that sin is war with God. Even a failure to acknowledge his existence and to love him as we ought to love him is a great crime. And crime deserves punishment. Since God is a perfect judge, he will punish every crime. But God is also merciful and gracious. He has provided a way for people to escape that judgment. God doesn't sweep sin under the carpet. Instead, he put that sin on the shoulders of his Son, and Jesus took that sin on himself willingly. When Jesus died on the cross, he absorbed the wrath of God, the punishment for sin. But he didn't die for everyone's sins. Only those who come to him in faith have their sins paid for. If you have a right relationship with God, your sins have already been

punished. They were crushed on the cross, almost two thousand years ago. But if you don't have real faith in Jesus, your sins remain on you and you remain under God's wrath.

When Jesus talks about fire in verse 49, he's talking about judgment. When he mentions baptism in verse 50, he's still talking about judgment. He says, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" Jesus isn't referring to a literal baptism here. In the Old Testament, there are passages that talk about God's judgment coming upon people like a flood (Ps. 42:7; 69:1–2). Jesus was using the language of baptism to talk about how he would be immersed in God's wrath. The flood of God's judgment, reserved for sin, washed upon Jesus and threw him into death itself. The waves of God's hate against sin, which is evil because it destroys God's creation and is an insult to the Creator, rushed at Jesus and he stood there and took it. Sin is war against God, and Jesus was treated like a war criminal, though he is the only one who has ever been truly innocent. He was plunged into hell on earth because we deserve hell. That is a gracious gift from God. If you can see who Jesus is and what he has done, receive that gift. It comes without price, but once you have it, it will change your life.

The third point that Jesus makes is that we only have a limited time to settle our affairs with God. If you knew you might go to jail for not paying your debts, you would be wise to pay them immediately. In verses 57–59, Jesus imagines a financial issue that hasn't been settled. You owe and haven't paid. Your accuser is going to take you to court. It's best to arrange a settlement now while you can, or else you will go to prison. The truth is that we all will appear before God in judgment. All of us have a debt that we cannot repay. Our sin is that debt. The only way to reach a settlement is to trust Jesus. If you haven't done that, do that now. Jesus may return soon. Or you may die soon. Either way, we will stand before him. Take his offer of salvation now.

And if you have received that gift of salvation, your life should be changed. Live according to what you know to be true. Live in a way that's pleasing to Jesus. Live as if he were right next to you. The fact is that we will be judged by our works. That is not contrary to the idea that salvation is a gift. If you've received that gift, you've been saved entirely by God's grace, which can only be received through faith. But if you've received that gift, your life will naturally produce good works. Good works do not save us, but they are the evidence that we have a right relationship with God. If you have no particularly Christian works to show for your life, you have never had real faith. If that is the case, now is the time to come to Jesus for real.

Jesus is King. Live as if he is your ruler. He is also a loving older brother and a friend. Love him accordingly. And he's the one who died for your sin. Be grateful. We will all serve some kind of master. Jesus is the only perfectly loving, perfectly righteous master, the only one who would die for you and the only one who can forgive your sins against God. While your master is away in heaven, serve him as if heaven is on earth. If you've received peace from God, don't just give a piece of your life to him. Give him your whole life.