

**The Uncomfortable Sayings of Jesus**  
***“I have come to bring fire on the earth,  
and how I wish it were already kindled!”***

Passages: Micah 7:1-7  
Luke 12:49-53

There’s a show that’s been running on TV for many years now called “*Everybody Loves Raymond*”. Why does everybody love him? Because Raymond is such a nice guy! He always means well and he would never deliberately harm anyone. This is why “*Everybody Loves Raymond*”!

A lot of people think the same way about Jesus. “*Everybody loves Jesus*”! Why? Because He’s such a nice guy! He always means well; He’s always there to help people in need. And He would never intentionally harm anyone. “*Everybody loves Jesus*”!

It’s this very image of Jesus as ‘Mr. Nice Guy’ that makes today’s reading so uncomfortable for us. I mean, all of a sudden, this “nice guy”, Jesus, doesn’t sound so nice any more.

Think about the text from Luke 12.

First, Jesus says that He has come to bring fire to the earth. He’s talking about judgment! Of course, it’s important to remember that His judgment would not involve legal guilt or condemnation. John 3:17 says that the Son of God came “***not to condemn the world but that the world, through Him, might be saved.***” Jesus’ judgment, therefore, was not a legal type of judgment in which people would be proven guilty and punished. Rather, Jesus’ judgment was a moral and theological type of judgment; one that would separate good thinking from bad, good theology from false, right perspectives from wrong ones. Jesus came to separate these things (like a farmer separates the wheat from the chaff) and, with His fire, to destroy every false idea and ideology that undermined the health of humanity. Indeed, Jesus was impatient to rid the world of every influence of evil! “***I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!***”

We might even call this verse His “*Mission Statement*”. In the corporate world, every major company formulates a mission statement. This mission statement boldly declares why the company exists and what it is here to accomplish. If

the company doesn't know why it exists, then it will never know if it is failing or succeeding in its mission. Here is Jesus' mission statement! ***"I have come to bring fire on the earth...!"*** This is what Jesus was primarily on about. He came to bring fire; to introduce true discernment and judgment. He came to teach the human race to separate good from evil and truth from falsehood. He came to present us with two options: to follow Him and His ways (and have our false thinking and behaviour 'burned away') or to continue living our lives smothered by the false thinking and false religions of the world. And again, let me stress: this did not involve *condemnation*. Rather, it involved *liberation*! Jesus came to set us free from the corrupting influences of false beliefs and sin. So, here's the million dollar question: Will we follow Him?

Now, if you understand this idea of fire, then you'll be able to make sense of the words that immediately follow. In verse 50, Jesus says, ***"But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!"***

Of course, fire and water don't normally go together, but the baptism Jesus is speaking about here is not a *water baptism*—Rather, Jesus is talking about His own *baptism of fire*! As the Gospels make clear, Jesus was forced to live out His mission statement even unto death! In the certainty of His vision for the liberation of humanity, Jesus was baptised with the fire of suffering and death. Only by going through this fire could Jesus become the One who baptises with fire! In other words, not only did Jesus bring fire to the earth, **He would willingly become its first victim!** What's even more is that this fire...a fire of purification... would not go out at His crucifixion, but would only get brighter and brighter in the subsequent baptism of His followers! Can you see why Jesus couldn't wait for His baptism of fire to be completed! ***"But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!"***

And this brings us to verses 51-53, clearly the most controversial part of the whole passage! For it's in the context of Jesus' mission statement to bring fire to the earth that He goes on to say: <sup>51</sup> ***Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.*** <sup>52</sup> ***From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.*** <sup>53</sup> ***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."***

This is tough to take. I mean, we often think of Jesus as the One who came to bring people together in love and happiness? We think of Him as the One who

reconciles people to one another? How can He also be a divider of people...and especially of families?

I want you to go back in your mind to a scene found in **Luke 8**. Jesus is in the midst of His disciples, teaching them about the Kingdom of God. Jesus' mother and brothers come to see Him, but the room is too crowded, so they stay outside and send a message in to Jesus. But when the messenger finally pushes his way inside and announces to Jesus that His mother and brothers are standing outside and want to see Him, how does Jesus respond? He simply says, ***"My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice!"*** Now, do you realise what Jesus has just done? He has broken the fifth commandment which says, ***"Honour your father and your mother."*** By not immediately going out to see His mother, He has dishonoured her...and he has done it publicly!

But why? What's the point He was making?

He was simply reinforcing the primary aspect of His mission on earth. His primary mission was ***"to bring fire on the earth..."***. In other words, His primary mission was to burn up all the stupid ways of human thinking...to challenge all our false ideologies and man-made ideals... and to bring us back to a proper understanding of life in the way that God originally created it.

And that's why Jesus was challenging the institution of family...of family loyalties, and family priorities, and family values. He was challenging these, not because the family is evil—to the contrary, the whole nature of the family is a God-given blessing and the source of life, stability and nurture. No, Jesus wasn't discarding the family, but He was challenging some of the institutional accretions and cultural additions that were crowding out and discolouring God's original purposes for family.

Think about it: One's loyalty to family is not always a good thing! If you lack discernment, family loyalty can turn you into *a gangster* and *a murderer*-- just look at the Mafia! It can turn you into a sorcerer (spells and incantations are often passed down through families)! It can turn you into a bigoted racist (you follow the behaviours of your parents)! It can also turn you into a money-obsessed snob (our attitude towards money is mostly learned from our parents)!

But Jesus came to restore in us God's value system. He came to give us a new world view... a worldview based in God's truth and girded by the Holy Spirit; a worldview that intentionally reorients our minds back to God as our Heavenly Father, and causes us to finally appreciate what true family is about, set within the wider context of the universal family of God! This was Jesus' mission—to liberate us from the baggage of family and culture and give us the freedom to choose to follow God's ways!

And that's why He caused so many divisions! For, the fact is that **division** comes from having to make a **decision!** You might even say that the root of all **division** is **decision!**

Let me illustrate this by referring to our upcoming Federal election. We have two major parties (Labor and Liberal), plus one minor party (the Greens). Each of these parties comes to us with a *platform* based in a *worldview*.

- The Labor worldview says we need to protect workers with strong government intervention.
- The Liberal worldview says we need to encourage companies and employers by having little government intervention- let the market determine everything.
- The Greens say, whatever you do, put a priority on caring for the environment.

This election campaign that we are currently in is basically a time when each party tries to persuade Australian voters to shift their worldview. But, of course, the result is that we have divisions! Decisions create divisions (even inside of us!)! But, guess what, you have to decide!

Now, we might say, *"Wouldn't it be nice if we all agreed and a got along! Wouldn't it be nice if we didn't have different parties and platforms. Wouldn't it be nice if we didn't have elections."* But we only say that because we don't like the conflict! Sorry!...but **the root of all division is decision! You must make a choice!**

Now, I'm not saying that Jesus was a politician, but the fact is that, when He started saying some of the things that are recorded in the Gospels (***"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's"; "No one can serve two masters..."***) His words immediately split the electorate down the middle! Some loved Him! Many hated Him! Why? Because His words revealed this new worldview. Jesus

had a political platform that radically challenged the old, and boldly chartered a new course for humanity. This is what got Jesus in trouble! His words demanded people to make a choice—and choice causes divisions! When He said, ***“I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me”***, He gave us no room to wiggle! It’s no wonder the Pharisees (Israel’s most powerful political party) had Jesus crucified! (Fortunately, we don’t do that anymore!)

**Decision is the root of all division.** Even Jesus’ own mother and brothers were called to make a decision *for* or *against* Him! (We know that Jesus’ mother did eventually choose to follow her Son, and she did right up to the cross! Jesus’ biological brothers also became followers. James became an elder in the church of Jerusalem.)

That, of course, is a happy ending! But let me tell you a story that isn’t so happy. It’s the story of **St. Francis of Assisi**, whose father, Pietro di Bernadone, was the wealthiest man in Assisi. He had raised Francis to be a man of business. But Francis answered another call, and obeyed another Father; God! Pietro tried everything to dissuade Francis. Indeed, when he found Francis begging for food and living in rags, he verbally abused him in public, calling him a half-wit. Then, he physically dragged him home and locked him in a closet. Pietro then beat him for publicly humiliating the family name, and reproached him for making so little return on his upbringing. When all that failed to change Francis’ mind, Pietro told his son to get out of town.

But the story doesn’t end there. Pietro was so determined to stop his son from being a monk that he filed religious proceedings against him with the bishop of Rome. The bishop had to determine whether Francis was, indeed, called by God to the life of celibacy, so he asked Francis point blank whether he would give up all his property. Francis responded by taking off all his clothes and laying them at the feet of the bishop. Standing there stark naked, Francis turned his father and said, *“Hitherto I have called you father on earth, but now I say with more confidence, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven’, in whom I place all my hope and treasure”*. Pietro left, taking Francis’ clothes and remaining money. Francis was then covered by the robe of his bishop.

How can we understand the conflict between Francis and his father? Well, before I make any commentary, let me remind you of St. Francis’ most famous prayer: *“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon . . .”* Tell me, how can we reconcile

the division Francis had with his father with this most-famous poem about reconciliation and peace?

The only way is by understanding the nature of choice! You see, Francis made a choice to live a life of poverty for the sake of a higher calling! He didn't do it to spite his father. He wasn't picking a fight. He wasn't being deliberately nasty to his father. He was simply making a decision...a decision that lead to division.

This is the point Jesus is making. His dramatic statement about division in one's household emphasises the fact that all of us are called to make a decision. Jesus wasn't urging **division**. He was urging **decision**—He was urging us to count the cost of following Him.

Let me finish with one last story. In our day, we rarely hear about a Christian Olympian or athlete who refuses to train or to compete on a Sunday. But during the 1924 Olympics, a man named **Eric Liddell** did exactly that! Because he believed that the 10 commandments were an essential element of his faith in Jesus Christ, Liddell (the favourite to win the race) categorically refused to compete when he discovered that his race would be held on a Sunday! As you can imagine, this decision created all sorts of division, even within Liddell's family and between his friends.

Now we can sit in judgment and say, "*He shouldn't have done it*" or, "*Yes, he did what was right.*" I really don't think there is a right or wrong answer. But what I'd rather focus on here is the need for us all to make decisions—decisions about following Jesus! Each one of these decisions will, inevitably, divide! For example,

- What kind of people do you hang out with?
- What sort of career are you pursuing?
- How do you spend your money?
- How open and welcoming is your home?
- What school do you send your kids to?

None of these questions has a black and white answer. But the point is that **every choice we make in life needs to be thought through** in the light of who Jesus is and His calling on our lives. I know, for example, someone who finally had to give up his job – a job he had been faithfully doing for years – for the simple reason that he was forced to work every single Sunday. Perhaps if he

only had to work one in three or one in four Sundays, he might have made a different decision. But because it was every Sunday, he had to say 'No!'

I know someone else who decided to stop watching TV, except for the news. His decision was based on the way he felt it was negatively influencing his (and his children's) minds.

Every decision we make in life has a bearing (large or small) on the way we follow Jesus. By putting a priority on Him (and not doing what everyone else wants you to do) you may have to make decisions that, in the end, bring division in your family or amongst your friends! That is what Jesus was talking about in today's passage, when He said:

***<sup>51</sup> Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. <sup>52</sup> From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. <sup>53</sup> 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."***

In the end, not everybody loves Jesus.

Let's pray.