

**LUKE 12:49–53.** (EHV)

**“I came to throw fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already ignited. But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is finished! Do you think that I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. Yes, from now on there will be five divided in one household: three against two, and two against three. 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 her mother-in-law.”**

Are you familiar with the term *homewrecker*?

Two of my brothers, when they were younger, were once playing baseball in the house on Christmas Eve, using popcorn kernels and a sausage we had been given as a gift. One of them swung the somewhat greasy sausage so hard, it slipped out of his hand, sailed over my other brother’s head, and went through one of our living room windows. Not a wise move on a cold winter night. But even though he wrecked a part of our home, he wasn’t a homewrecker. That’s not what the term *homewrecker* refers to.

A homewrecker is someone who breaks up a family. Oftentimes it’s used for a person who engages in an affair with someone who is married to someone else, thereby initiating a series of unpleasant confrontations and events that eventually leads to a divorce. But it can also be used more broadly for anyone responsible for splitting up a family in any way.

You heard the Gospel earlier. Didn’t it sound like Jesus was telling his disciples that he is going to be a homewrecker? Even worse, didn’t it sound like he was *eager* to be a homewrecker? There are some tough passages in the Gospels, and this is definitely one of them. Some passages are tough because their meaning is difficult to understand; others are tough because they present truths that are tough to swallow. This passage seems to be tough for both of those reasons. Let’s take a closer look at Jesus’s words and see if he is, in fact, an eager homewrecker.

Jesus begins, “I have come to throw fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already ignited.” When Jesus speaks of fire, we might think of Pentecost after he ascended, when tongues of fire appeared on the believers’ heads representing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Certainly we could imagine him saying that he wished the fire of the Holy Spirit were already ignited all around the world. Or we might think of Judgment Day, when the earth and everything in it will be consumed by fire. We could also imagine Jesus wishing that that fire were already ignited, since that would mean that his believers were now fully experiencing their salvation in heaven.

But here in this context, it seems to mean something else. Jesus says he came to *throw* fire on the earth—like a person taking the glowing coals in the bottom of a large oven-pot and throwing them onto something he wishes to burn. Jesus is basically saying, “I came to start a firestorm on the earth.” What’s even stranger is that he goes on: “And how I wish it were already ignited.” We’ll come back to this later.

“But” first, he says, “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is finished!” Jesus had already been baptized by John the Baptist at this point, so that isn’t what he is talking about. But he once told his apostles James and John and their mother that his upcoming sufferings in Jerusalem would be like undergoing a baptism. Even today we use the phrase

“baptism by fire” to describe when someone experiences something for the first time without any formal preparation, which often makes the experience unpleasant. So Jesus is saying, “I really wish that the firestorm I came to start were already ignited, but I know that I have to suffer intensely and die first, and how distressed I am until it’s all finished.”

But his disciples must have given him a quizzical or surprised look especially at that first part, that he came to throw fire on the earth. They seem to have gotten hung up on that and missed the part about his upcoming sufferings and his distress. And Jesus notices that. So he asks, “What? Do you think that I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” Jesus is basically saying, “If it surprises you when you hear me say that I came to throw fire on the earth, then maybe we need to clarify why you think I came. I didn’t come to bring peace, but division.” The fire Jesus wishes was already ignited is the fire of division, as it’s portrayed on your service folder cover.

So what does Jesus mean by this? First, Jesus is providing his own commentary on the angels’ Christmas song, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace,” and making sure we don’t get the wrong idea about it. Yes, he came to bring peace on earth, but not peace in the earth, not peace throughout the earth, not earthly peace. The peace he came to bring does not consist of all humans on earth walking hand in hand with smiling faces, or the end of gunshots, warfare, and violence in this life. Jesus did not come to establish peace treaties between all the nations of the earth.

Jesus came to win spiritual peace, heavenly peace. Jesus came to establish peace of heart and conscience, peace that stems from the forgiveness of all of our sins, peace that stems from knowing that we have been reconciled with God. Jesus came to bring peace to those who, by God’s gift of grace, believe that they have not an angry judge but a gracious Father for their God. If Jesus came not to bring peace in the earth, but division, then he came to bring peace precisely in the midst of earth’s strife and hostility and warfare—not based on the optimistic sentiment that one day life on earth will be a walk in the park, but peace realized right now even though we know that life on earth will never be a walk in the park, peace based on the sure hope that one day it will all end, but not here on earth. It will end when earth itself comes to an end and Jesus brings us and all believers to his side in heaven.

Second, Jesus is reminding us of what he tells us later in the book of Revelation, that he does not like it when we are lukewarm. You can only be either for or against Jesus and his teaching, and Jesus prefers that people either be hot or cold—passionately for or passionately against him. Those are the only fitting responses to words that are as weighty as his are. So Jesus doesn’t tolerate people hanging around closer the center, in the lukewarm zone, for very long. When he sends out his word, he aims to drive people away from the center, so that they are clearly on one side or the other.

Third, Jesus is telling us with his question and answer that, when his message is preached in its wholeness and pureness, when his message is preached and taught and shared the way he wants and intends it to be, there are going to be a lot of people who reject it. And they won’t just reject it and walk away; it will create strife and confrontation, and thus also division. In fact, this division will even wreck families where his message of spiritual peace is accepted. “Yes, from now on there will be five divided in one household: three against two, and two against three.” Notice that this is maximum division. It’s not one against four, and four against one—so that

truth either has the clear majority or is just ignored and left alone because it's the oddball—but three against two, and two against three.

Now, even though Jesus says he is bringing this division, there are other passages that make clear that it isn't so much Jesus that causes the division. Jesus and his word, properly speaking, only unite people, and unite them on the deepest possible level, on a spiritual level. No, properly speaking, the division Jesus is talking about is caused by sin in human beings, because of how the darkness of sin naturally reacts to the light of God's grace. Jesus is basically reminding us of the doctrine of original sin—that by nature our minds and hearts are hostile to God and his word. They don't want to submit to God's word and they have no natural ability to do so.

Yes, Jesus preaches the forgiveness of sins, but rejoicing in and benefitting from that message first requires us to admit that we are sinners, deserving of eternal punishment in hell, and we have no natural desire to admit such a thing. We are too proud. Even though the message of Jesus's peace is the best thing for us, we naturally resist what's best for us, like a baby in a bad mood who refuses to take the spoonful of food, or like the alcoholic or drug addict who refuses to enter the detox or rehabilitation program even when it's offered to him freely. We're naturally self-destructive, and so even when those closest to us, who love us the most, show us how good the message of Jesus's peace is, our natural inclination is not only to want nothing to do with it, but also to want nothing to do with those encouraging us to listen to it.

The result? Division. Homewrecking. “Three against two and two against three.”

Jesus makes it very personal for us too. He doesn't just say “three against two and two against three.” He asks us to picture this division on a very personal level: “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 her mother-in-law.” Think of your son, think of your daughter. Think of your father, your mother. Think of your in-laws, whether parents or children. Now imagine yourself at odds with them over Jesus, over his word.

Now, when Jesus says “three against two and two against three” and goes on to give these examples, he isn't saying that this is how it's going to be in every single family. If you have a family that is united around Jesus and his word, these words of Jesus should cause you to give special thanks. Jesus is saying that unity when he is in the picture is the exception, not the norm. We should be ready for, and ready to accept, any one of these divisions he mentions for the sake of his name and his kingdom. And needless to say, if this division can and will occur within the immediate family, that means it can and will occur in other relationships too, such as those between more extended family members and close friends.

Unless you want surface-level, earthly peace. If you want surface-level, earthly peace, if you always want to be able to gather around your table without even a hint of tension or strife, then you can ignore Jesus and his word. Whatever your family members are doing, whatever they're into, whatever they believe—it's fine. Just accept it. There's no such thing as original sin and free salvation. There's no such thing as heaven or hell. There's no such thing as truth and falsehood. That's what John Lennon encouraged us to envision in his song, “Imagine.” “Imagine there's no heaven—It's easy if you try—No hell below us, Above us only sky. ... Imagine all the

people Living life in peace.” Just stop letting anything matter. But in that case, your peace will last only as long as you last, only as long as the earth lasts. It will not be eternal.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus says this so openly? It's actually one of the reasons we know his religion is true. With false religious sects, the leaders and adherents try to conceal the negative aspects of the religion until after they've got you firmly in their grasp. Only once you're fully on board do they tell you, “Oh, by the way, we also believe this and do that.” “Okay, well, too late to back out now. In for a penny, in for a pound.” Not Jesus. He makes no attempt to conceal the homewrecking his word will cause. He's not ashamed of it.

In fact, let's go back to the beginning of his words now: “I have come to throw fire [*or* start a firestorm] on the earth, and how I wish it were already ignited.” How can Jesus not only boldly share the truth about the division that will attend the preaching of his word, but even say that he eager for it, that he can't wait for it?

If Jesus is saying that he wishes that the fire he came to start were already ignited all over the earth, and he says that this fire and division will attend his word wherever it goes, then he is basically saying this: “I know that a firestorm and division is going to follow wherever my word goes, but I want that fire to be burning all around the world, because that will mean that my word has spread all around the world. And that will mean that, yes, in some families of five there will be three who are against it, but that also means there will be two who know it and believe it and are for it who weren't before! In this house a son will be divided against his father, but that means that a son will know it and believe it and be for it who wasn't before! And in that house a mother will be divided against her daughter, but that means that a mother will know it and believe it and be for it who wasn't before! And the inner peace, joy, and hope that my word will bring all of those people, even in the midst of their painful division, will be more than worth all the painful division they will have to undergo, because that will be inner peace, joy, and hope that they didn't have before, and it will be eternal!”

I haven't asked the question yet: What does this look like in your family? I am extremely blessed that, at this point in history, my immediate family of ten is united in its faith in Jesus and his word. But it can get really awkward at family gatherings beyond our immediate family, such as at weddings. We have some who reject infant baptism and the real presence of Jesus's body and blood in the Lord's Supper and who promote decision theology, and we have others who are even more sectarian and a few that don't think much of religion altogether. I've had some pretty intense interactions with uncles and aunts, and when we came away from them, the division was still there. When I was still on Facebook, I made contact with former friends and classmates from Lutheran schools that I attended, and after talking with some of them, it was clear that even though there used to be peace, there is now division.

Do I wish that division were gone? Absolutely. Would I sacrifice one letter of Jesus's word to make it so? I hope you will say it with me in your hearts: Not on my life. The peace of conscience, the joy of forgiveness, and the heavenly hope I have from Jesus and his word is not worth giving up for any temporary earthly reward or condition.

It reminds me of John 6. At the beginning crowds of people are swarming around Jesus to listen to him teach. But he makes the “mistake” of continuing to teach, of diving deeper and making himself clearer. As he keeps on teaching, more and more people keep leaving in disgust

until, by the end of the chapter, there are only a few left. And Jesus turns to his twelve apostles and asks them, “You do not want to leave too, do you?”

And Peter for once gives a beautiful answer: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!” In other words, “Lord, even if everyone should despise and forsake us because of you, it would still be worth it to follow you and be your disciple, because the life we get from you we can’t get anywhere else.”

Is Jesus an eager homewrecker? In a way, yes, he is. He wants every single person to know the truth, even though he knows that in many cases the spread of his truth will inflame the sinful nature of those closest to those who believe it, thus causing division. That’s okay. He would rather divide one or two souls from the rest of their family here on earth, if it means he will save those one or two eternally, than have the whole family perish eternally in hell.

“As far as it depends on you,” the apostle Paul writes, “live at peace with everybody.” But as Jesus tells us here, when it comes to the truths of his word, be ready for and be comfortable with some homewrecking. As unpleasant as it is now, you will see how much it was worth it when you stand in perfect and unbreakable unity with your true family in Jesus’s glory in heaven. Amen.