# Hard Sayings 4: I came to bring fire to the earth

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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Luke 12:49-53

49 “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52 From now on five in one household will be 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.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

We’ve talked about the different ways that some of the sayings of Jesus are “hard,” and this saying—the fourth in our series—is hard in yet another way. Some of the sayings seem hard to understand. Some of the sayings are hard to do. But this saying is hard, I think, because we wish it not to be true.

That is, this passage especially discusses the division that occurs because of Jesus. We call Jesus the Prince of Peace—a good Biblical title, to be sure—but Jesus here reminds us that he might also be called the Prince of Division. If you seek to follow Jesus, it might lead to your being estranged from others. Or, if you’re in a family that loves Jesus (whether they love him well or not, and obey him well or not), you might be estranged from your family. Many of us have experienced this in one way or another. It is a typical experience; it is hard.

I have a friend who was raised by fundamentalist Christians of some stripe. He is very smart, very caustic in his wit at times, and he never tires of making fun of stupid Christians. There is no shortage of stupid Christians around, so this is an easy game for him. Perhaps his venting helps salve the wounds of his childhood; I do not know. But my heart breaks for him and for his parents; there seems very little hope for connection.

I know another couple, the most decent, humble loving people I know. They have tried hard to follow Jesus well, loving God, their family, their society; pouring their lives out for others in effective and loving ministry for years. Some of their children have very little faith commitment, and I know it breaks their hearts, second guessing what they could have done or not have done. Those of us who are parents long for our children to come to the same connection to Jesus and his way that we feel.

But Jesus reminds us, here, that there is no promise that this will happen. We can’t help but have profound and lasting effects on our children, and as general rule, children who are brought up in loving homes are able to express and give love. But the contents of our will and the contents of our thoughts are not passed on via DNA or contagion. In the end, people need to choose for themselves the way they will follow. And whenever there is choice, there will be division:

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.

But wait—there is more. Let’s back up. What baptism is Jesus talking about? You can put this under the category of “mildly hard to understand,” for Jesus is clearly not talking about baptism. Baptism is a sign of repentance, and sign of “turning around,” of going in a new direction. What did Jesus do that caused a new way to turn? Baptism is a symbolic death, as we go under the water and come up again. Of course, Jesus is referring to his own, upcoming death. Although death is the ultimate division, we know that Jesus death also brings unity and peace: Peace between humanity and our Creator, and peace between people, breaking down the wall of separation. So the Way of Jesus can also be the way for the natural and normal divisions of life to be mended, to be healed. We have faith that the death—and the resurrection—of Jesus provides a way of reconciliation even when we have given up hope.

And let’s back up a little more: Jesus exclaims that he has come to bring fire which had not yet starting burning. Is this the fire of judgment, destroying evil? Or the cleansing fire, that removes dross? I don’t think so, the fire and the baptism lead to division. Is this the fire of sacrifice, an image of his impending death (like the fire for the sacrifice of Isaac)? Perhaps, but since he doesn’t mention any more sacrificial imagery, I suspect not.

On Pentecost Sunday, it is hard not to read this but the fire of the Holy Spirit. Our scripture readings today describe how “tongues of fire” seem to appear over the early disciples. I don’t think this was literally fire—but what were the observers seeing? Were they not seeing some manifestation of the divine energy that comes with the arrival in fullness of the Spirit of God? Jesus elsewhere tells his disciples that one advantage of his leaving them is that the Spirit of God would come to them. No longer would his disciples be limited to the number of people who could physically follow Jesus around in the first century. Rather the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, would be with any group of believers, in any place and at any time, “wherever two or more are gathered in my name.” I think Jesus looked forward to this day, when the fire of the Holy Spirit would come to the earth and spread his message and kingdom work worldwide.

And this is my hope and prayer for our congregation, too. We are small in number, but God is mighty. We may not have the resources and personnel large churches have, but we have one another, with a Spirit and a Baptism that can unite us (even if at times we face division). We are sometimes cold in our affection, and we cannot see the work of God to do, but the fire of the Spirit can warm our souls and enlighten our path.

Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

1. *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 12:49–53). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)