

Luke 12:49-59
The Opportunity

Most of the decisions we make are rather trivial. We have to decide what to have for lunch, which shirt to wear, or which DVD to watch on a Saturday night. These decisions affect only the moment. Others are more significant. We need to figure out which college to attend, whether or not to take that job offer, or which house to buy. These decisions can shape a life. But only one decision ultimately impacts eternity. Who is Jesus Christ, and will I receive Him as Savior and Lord.

Few things leave a person with more regret than a missed opportunity. To have had the chance to do something, and not taken it, is something that can live with a person for years. The wondering of “what if” can be haunting. Yet, with any decision, there is really little point in looking back. The opportunity, once missed, cannot be taken. We have a different future because of the choices we made.

If we pick the wrong shirt, or even take the wrong career path, we can learn to live with that. But if we miss the opportunity to respond to the call of Jesus Christ, we are lost in the truest sense of that word. Think of Judas Iscariot. He had every opportunity. He walked, slept, and ate with Jesus for three years. He heard the talks and witnessed the miracles. He saw perfect love modeled perfectly. He knew Jesus as intimately as only a handful of others have ever known Him. Yet, despite this extraordinary opportunity, Judas chose to renounce Jesus and participate in His crucifixion.

But Judas was not alone. There were the Pharisees and other teachers of the Law who refused to acknowledge Jesus. His ministry was public and extended for three years. He covered a wide range of territory and news about Him spread everywhere. Tens of thousands crowded the streets of Jerusalem when He entered the city, “⁸most of the crowd spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road. ⁹The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David;
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord;
Hosanna in the highest!” (Matthew 21:8-9).

About a week later those very same people, when “²²Pilate said to them, ‘then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?’ They all said, ‘crucify Him!’ ²³And he said, ‘why, what evil has He done?’ But they kept shouting all the more, saying, ‘crucify Him!’ (Matthew 27:22-23). Judas was not alone is missing the opportunity.

Nor are we without our Judases today. While we do not have the Incarnate Christ among us, we do have the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. We have the evidence of two millennia of testimony from the saints of God. We have archaeological evidence. We have textual evidence. We have every opportunity.

In this passage, Jesus reminds His disciples of the consequences for wasting such an opportunity as they had. In doing so, He challenged their expectations of the Messiah. To Jewish minds the Messiah was associated with peace. Young Jews had learned from their earliest days of the Messiah that,

“His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

God had promised that “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever” (Ezekiel 37:26). Jews expected the Messiah to bring a time of peace.

This understanding was forfeited, however, when the Jewish people rejected their Messiah. That this was happening was becoming more apparent as Jesus moved irrevocably toward His crucifixion. Recognizing this, His message shifted from one of calling the masses to one of warning His disciples. The increasing intensity of Jesus’ warnings are seen in this passage as He tells His disciples of the opportunity before them and the consequences of missing it.

The Coming Judgment

There are few things about which Scripture is more clear than that all of humanity is divided into two groups - the saved and the damned. Despite all our arguments to the contrary, there are those who will spend eternity apart from God in hell. Jesus clearly stated this when He told His disciples “I have come to cast fire upon the earth” (v. 49).

The phrase “I have come” was often used by Jesus to specify His purpose. Ultimately that was described in Luke 19:10, “for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” More details were given in Matthew 9:13, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” and John 6:38, “for I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.”

In this specific instance, Jesus said that he came “to cast fire upon the earth” (v. 49). Fire was often understood metaphorically in Scripture to represent God’s judgment.

“For a fire is kindled in My anger,
And burns to the lowest part of Sheol,
And consumes the earth with its yield,
And sets on fire the foundations of the mountains” (Deuteronomy 32:22).

“You will make them as a fiery oven in the time of your anger;
The Lord will swallow them up in His wrath,
And fire will devour them” (Psalm 21:9)

“From the Lord of hosts you will be punished with thunder and earthquake and loud noise,
With whirlwind and tempest and the flame of a consuming fire” (Isaiah 29:6).

The disciples understood the illustration. What they did not see clearly is that this wrath was not only for the Gentiles, but for all those who rejected the Messiah. It was not only for the Gentile nations that had warred against ancient Israel. This was a judgment still to come. That this was a future event is indicated by Jesus saying “how I wish it were already kindled” (v. 49). No past event could be intended here. This future judgment was not to be completed until Jesus’ earthly ministry was completed. He still had “a baptism to undergo” (v. 50).

This baptism is, of course, a reference to the cross. Jesus fully understood the overwhelming pain and heartache to come. As a baptism involves immersion in water, so the atonement involved Jesus being ‘immersed’ in the humiliation and agony of the cross. We must remember that Jesus lived His entire life in the expectation of Calvary. As shocking as that event was to His followers, it was eternally anticipated by Jesus. We can only marvel at the commitment of Jesus to finish the work begun with His Incarnation. We must acknowledge that His life was given willingly and voluntarily. He did not bear the cross because He could not avoid it. He did not endure humiliation because it was unavoidable. He did it because He loved us. And since we know that Jesus never changes, He has that same love, that same commitment, to us today.

So disturbing was His expectation of it that He cried out “how distressed I am until it is accomplished” (v. 50). The word conveys the idea of being gripped or overwhelmed by fear. It was the same word used by Luke to describe the response of the villagers to hearing that Jesus had driven a legion of demons into a herd of pigs, “and all the people of the country of the Gerasenes and the surrounding district asked Him to leave them, for they were gripped with great fear” (Luke 8:37).

Interestingly, it is also the same word used by Paul to describe how believers ought to be in the grip of Christ’s love, “for the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died” (2 Corinthians 5:14). Just as believers ought to be overpowered by Christ’s love, so the fear that that Jesus experienced was all-encompassing.

But we should neither wonder that Jesus possessed such fear, nor should we consider it a sign of weakness. He was the perfect Incarnation of a holy God. To go to the cross meant He would take upon Himself the sins of the world and bear the divine judgment for them. To be distressed seems to put it mildly. Yet there is no sense in which Jesus was complaining. Rather, Jesus, focusing on “the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). And by that atoning death, the world would forever be divided into believers and damned.

The Current Tension

Jesus continued to draw the distinction between those blessed and the cursed. He had just told the story of two servants, one blessed by his master and the other cut into pieces. The faithful servant had anticipated his master’s return and been ready. He had worked diligently to be prepared. The foolish, wicked servant had arrogantly believed he could behave as he wished without fear of accountability. He was wrong and faced the consequences of his lack of wisdom.

Jesus began with a rhetorical question. “Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth?” (v. 51). Not pausing to allow an answer, He continued, “I tell you, no, but rather division” (v. 51). The disciples had to be confused. This was not the message of a Messiah of peace. They had yet to learn that there could be no peace between a righteous God and unrepentant sinners. Again, we must remember the caveat given at the time of His birth,

“Glory to God in the highest,

And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased” (Luke 2:14).

We ought to take this to heart. We ought not to be surprised when the world hates us. We can have no true fellowship with those who are not of Christ. We are naive if we think we can live wholeheartedly for Jesus and be at peace with the world. We are at war. As a great saint once said, “it is hardly surprising if we are driven by the blasts of storms when our chief aim on this sea of life is to displease wicked men” (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*).

The illustration Jesus used to make His point is significant. There is no more established social unit than the family. In virtually every known culture, throughout all of human history, the family has been the most basic construct. It is never more heartbreaking that when families fall apart, and it is universally acknowledged that the common moral behaviors of respect and love are foundational to the family, even if they are found nowhere else in a particular culture.

Jesus began, “from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three” (v. 52). That is to say, beginning now, with the upcoming division even among His own disciples resulting in His crucifixion, until the end of time, even the most basic and seemingly indivisible social unit would be ripped asunder. Being explicit and giving greater detail, Jesus continued, saying that families would 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” (v. 53). That is to say, in every possible way.

This illustration made sense in the extended families of the time. Our common nuclear family of a husband, wife, and children exclusively is a twentieth century development. Throughout most of human history, and certainly in the classical world of 1st century Palestine, families were often made up of relations well beyond the husband, wife and children. Grandparents, in-laws, and even uncles and aunts frequently made up the basic family, for both social as well as economic reasons. The illustration used by Jesus would have been sensible to all who listened.

Also, this was not an entirely new teaching. In sending out His disciples, Jesus had warned, “brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death” (Matthew 10:21). As shocking as this statement was, Jesus wanted His disciples to clearly understand the cost of what they were undertaking. He came to bring division, it is true, but it is also true that the cost of standing with Jesus in opposition to unbelieving family members was worth it. As Jesus promised, “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29).

The Need for Discernment

With so much at stake, the need for discernment was obvious. This was an opportunity not to be missed. Jesus had, so far, been unimpressed by the discernment shown by the generation to whom He preached. He had revealed and proclaimed the kingdom of God for nearly three years, and yet the increasing hostility of the people in general, and the religious leaders specifically, indicated that they had not believed. They had shown remarkable blindness. As Paul would write later, they considered themselves

“¹⁹a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth” (Romans 2:19-20).

Jesus did not concur in their lofty opinion of themselves. Instead, He called them hypocrites. “⁵⁴When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘a shower is coming,’ and so it turns out. ⁵⁵And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, ‘it will be a hot day,’ and it turns out that way. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?” (v. 54-56).

In the ancient world, predicting the weather was a very unscientific occupation. Still it was necessary, since most people farmed and needed to know when to plant crops, protect from frosts, and bring in the harvest. Without the modern advantages of radar and satellites, they relied upon visual clues and knowledge gleaned from discovering patterns over time. Most cultures became very adept at such practices.

The ancient Jews were no different. They knew how to read the weather patterns familiar in the region around the Sea of Galilee. They were able to interpret the meaning of clouds forming in the West (over the Mediterranean). They knew that clouds coming from that direction meant rain. This knowledge was old. As early as Elijah we have records of such understanding, “⁴⁴it came about at the seventh time, that he said, ‘behold, a cloud as small as a man’s hand is coming up from the sea.’ And he said, ‘Go up, say to Ahab, “prepare your chariot and go down, so that the heavy shower does not stop you.”’ ⁴⁵In a little while the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy shower. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel” (1 Kings 18:44-45). Likewise, when the winds blew from the deserts in the South, it was going to be a hot day. Such winds were common and, when they blew in from that direction, always increased the temperature.

Jesus chastised the people for being able to discern the mysteries of the skies but not the evidence before their eyes. They were, simply, hypocrites. This may seem a harsh judgment, but the point Jesus was making was that they believed themselves able to discern the weather from such scanty evidence as a single cloud, or predict the temperature from a faint breeze, yet they refused to acknowledge the abundant evidence provided by Jesus as His claim to be the Messiah.

Think of the evidence these people had seen. He had proclaimed Himself the Messiah (Luke 4:21). He had healed diseases (Luke 4:40, 5:24, 8:44, among others). He had raised the dead (Luke 7:14, 8:54). He had demonstrated power over nature (Luke 8:24). He had expelled demons (Luke 8:33). He had show the power to create (Luke 9:16-17).

The issue was never a lack of evidence; it was stubborn unbelief. He simply was not the kind of Messiah they had hoped for. His goal was not to drive out the Romans and recreate the nation of Israel. These people were just as Jesus originally described them in His first teaching at Nazareth - spiritually blinded and oppressed, and held captive by sin. Their response at that time was “they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff” (Luke 4:29). And their hostility increased until it was evident that theirs was a premeditated plan to kill Jesus, “⁵³the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile and to question

Him closely on many subjects, ⁵⁴plotting against Him to catch Him in something He might say” (Luke 11:53-54).

Jesus understood their purpose. He confronted them directly, “I know that you are Abraham’s descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you” (John 8:37). They had every opportunity, but had refused to take it. Though many Jews would come to believe in the years ahead, the nation as a whole rejected their Messiah. They did not discern the “present time” (v.56). They missed their opportunity.

Jesus then asked another rhetorical question. “And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right?” (v. 57). This was a personal challenge. They were to “judge what is right” (v. 57). That is, examine themselves. They were to not let the religious leaders do their thinking for them. They were to judge for themselves. Belief in Jesus as the Messiah was an individual, not corporate decision.

The illustration He chose was again familiar to all. Though not as litigious a society as ours today, small communities frequently had their conflicts. To settle these disputes, local leaders (either religious or secular, depending on whether or not the dispute had to do with the Mosaic Law or Roman law) would be involved.

Jesus reminded them of the threat of judgment should a case be found against them. That is why He said, “while you are going with your opponent to appear before the magistrate, on your way there make an effort to settle with him” (v.58). In many situations the case would be brought before a magistrate an *archon*) who would conduct what we would today call a preliminary hearing. If the evidence was sufficient, then the accused would be brought before a judge who would hear the case and pronounce sentence. This meant that if the case did not go well, “the judge [would] turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison” (v. 58). The consequences would be severe. Jesus reminded them that they “you will not get out of there until you have paid the very last cent” (v. 59).

The message was clear. There was an opportunity before them and a choice to be made. If they chose wisely they would be blessed, if not they would face the consequences. The same is true for us today. We have opportunities to demonstrate our faith every day, and we must be attentive to discern them and committed enough to the cause of Christ to boldly stand against a hostile world.

Takeaways

May God give us the wisdom to discern the right path, and the courage to stand before the world as followers of Jesus Christ.