

Luke 12:49-53

August 10, 2025

In 2009, in a neighborhood in Oakland, California, there was a traffic median on which people kept putting their trash. Unfortunately, this is a problem in many cities. People have so little respect for their neighborhoods that they just throw their trash wherever they please. However, in 2009, in this neighborhood, a man named Dan Stevenson had enough. So he put a statue of Buddha on this traffic median so people would stop putting their trash there. And it worked! When asked, “Why Buddha?” Dan said he chose Buddha because Buddha isn’t controversial. Most people respect him. Buddha is safe. I’m glad he didn’t say that about Jesus, because if he did, he’d be wrong. Jesus isn’t safe. As Mr. Beaver said about Aslan in the Narnia Chronicles, “Aslan isn’t safe. But he is good.” Jesus isn’t safe. *But he is good.* That is what we see here in this powerful, tough, challenging, but wonderful little section of Jesus’ teaching. Think of this section as the healing balm of the sin-sick soul and the smelling salts of the sleeping soul. It’s both. The point that Jesus is making today is this: **Jesus Isn’t Safe, But He Is Good.** And we will see, **1. The Purification of Jesus. 2. The Polarization of Jesus.**

1. The Purification of Jesus. Here in Luke 12, we have Jesus teaching a crowd of people and his disciples, and in this chapter all sorts of topics come up. We’ll return to this chapter a few times in the next few months. Luke then records these short 4 verses with some startling claims. Firstly, Jesus has come to bring *fire*. What does that mean? Fire, in the Bible, can refer to the judgement of Hell, it can refer to God’s own presence- remember the burning bush or the pillar of fire and smoke that led the Israelites in the desert- and then the presence of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost- tongues of fire on each person. Fire often also, especially in Luke, refers to Judgment Day- that God is going to cleanse the universe of all the chaff, all the dross, all the impurities and only the pure will remain. Looking at the context of these verses, right before, Jesus was talking about being ready for Judgment Day, so it would make sense that this is the “fire” he’s going to bring- a purifying, cleansing fire that will cleanse the entire universe of every evil, wickedness, and impurity.

If anyone can understand how this works, it’s Wisconsinites the last few weeks. The wildfires in Canada that we’ve been noticing are something that naturally happens in many forests. Why? Because forest ecosystems get so many dead trees and residue and the soil becomes worthless, so the wood becomes incredibly dry, a spark happens, and the fire cleanses the forest of all the dead trees, dead branches, and allows nutrients to enter the soil, and the forest is made new. Fire is destructive, yet cleansing and good. The same is true for gold, silver, bronze, or steel. You can’t make those things better by washing them with soap- you have to burn them, melt them down, and burn the impurities! If this is true for a forest, or metal, how much more so for the universe? In many ways, Jesus is answering more questions than we even know to ask. Why are so many in our country so angry? Angry at the government, angry at their parents, angry at the patriarchy, angry at the rich, angry at people who are apparently behind everything wrong in this world? You see it everywhere! This past month, all anyone could talk about was a list of celebrities who

may have been involved in a perverted sexual scandal. Why? We all want justice- and really, judgment. Everyone says, “we shouldn’t judge,” unless it’s a dirty politician, or celebrities abusing children, or nations destroying other nations, governments committing genocide, the rich devouring the poor, one group of people abusing another group of people- we all want judgment! And so does Jesus! Jesus agrees! He says, “Oh how I wish that the fire would come!” Jesus desperately wants the world to be purified and purged of evil and sin and atrocity! The skeptic who asks, “If God is so good, and all powerful, why doesn’t he just get rid of all the people,” the answer is right here! He wants to! He desperately desires the perfect universe! So why doesn’t he do it? Why doesn’t he just get rid of all the evil? Because that fire would incinerate you and me, too. From God’s perspective, we’re evil, too. We’re liars, too. We’re greedy, too. We’re perverse, too. So, how can Jesus bring the purifying fire that cleanses the world of all evil, but still have us? Only if he first takes on the fire of God’s justice, first.

That’s what Jesus is referring to when he talks about his “Baptism.” There’s a place in the Gospel where James and John ask Jesus if they can be his “First in command” when he reigns over the world, and he asks them, “Can you drink the cup I’m going to drink, can you be baptized with my baptism?” And he’s referring to his death. Jesus’ death was, in a way, a fire- the purifying fire of God’s wrath- but he scorched as if he were every impurity, every evil to exist. Baptism drowns our sinful nature, it cleans us from sin- and on the cross, Jesus was drowned as if he were guilty of every sin. On the Cross, Jesus was ultimately punished with the infinite wrath of God that we have, too. And Jesus couldn’t wait for it. Look- he says, “I’m pressed, I’m desperate to do this.” That’s what Jesus came to do, and he couldn’t wait. He couldn’t wait to die for your sins. That’s how much he loves you. That’s how good he is. He is infinitely, unfathomably, good and true and beautiful. *But he isn’t safe.* Jesus is also polarizing.

2. The Polarization of Jesus. How can Jesus say that he didn’t come to bring peace? Peace on earth and mercy mild? Isn’t Jesus the Prince of Peace? Doesn’t Paul say, “Grace and peace” to you? Don’t we bless people and say, “The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace?” We talk about peace all the time! Is Jesus contradicting himself? No. Jesus did come to bring you peace- the important, healing, powerful peace- reconciliation and peace with God. You’re forgiven of everything you’ve done- you have peace with your past. You have peace with your future- nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ- not even death or sickness or poverty or angels or demons. You have peace with others because in the Gospel, you have a new power to forgive others when they sin against you, to choose compassion and sacrifice instead of serving yourself, and that often brings a lot of peace between you and your family, your friends, and others around you- *sometimes*. But sometimes, it won’t.

If Jesus really is who he claims to be, there is no “neutral” view of Jesus. You cannot simply admire or emulate or respect Jesus. Buddha is safe because he never claimed to be God, never demanded worship, and neither did Mohammed, or Ghandi, or many of the world's most

influential religious teachers. But Jesus did. He claimed to be the sole God of the Universe, and went as far as to say, “you must know me, you must believe in me, I must be your only God, I must be your life, I must be your greatest joy.” That’s polarizing! Either he is the great I AM and the creator of all things and we all must bow to him in worship, or he is fraud and lunatic and we certainly shouldn’t take his moral advice. You either believe in him, or you don’t. That’s a division. He also causes division by his saving work. If Jesus is who he says he is, and we are all as sinful as he says we are, and if it’s true that we can only be saved by believing in him, that means that those who believe in him are divided from those who don’t. It actually makes perfect sense. In 2022, Casey Bastian wrote an article about corruption in the Chicago Police Department about cops who testified against the corruption of other police officers, or didn’t take part in the corruption, and they received death threats from the other officers- dead rats in their lockers, planting drugs in their bags, even leaving them stranded in deadly situations. In a corrupt police department, doing and believing the right thing caused division. How much more, then, will Christians who are united with Christ, who live according to his commands, who love and serve him, be divided from a corrupt, evil world that is bound to be destroyed and purified by fire? If we as Christians are faithful in believing, and therefore speaking, about how we’re saved, how we live, our money, our souls, our choices, our neighbors, our enemies, there will be division between us and others. And yes, those divisions might happen in the workplace, in your friendgroup, and even in the home.

We have students in Campus Ministry and foreign students at our Lutheran high schools whose parents have threatened to disown because they have become Christians and have said, “I love you, but I will not worship our family’s false gods or our ancestors.” If Jesus is truly God, then that’s reality- we must worship him alone. And if Jesus is truly God, and every single word of his teachings is true, what do we do when there’s people we love, who often claim to be Christians, but also don’t hold to what Christ taught about baptism, Communion, salvation by grace, or any one of his teachings? If Jesus is truly God, and every single word he says is good, and true, and binding, then the most loving thing for Jesus, and to those who believe or don’t believe in him, is to make it clear that there is a division. A WELS teacher I knew once asked me, “You’re telling me I can’t take communion with my Catholic Grandmother?” And I said, “Not if you love her. When you join her at that table, you’re giving her the impression that the idea of praying and worshiping Mary and the Saints and salvation by works is absolutely okay- and Jesus clearly says it’s not.” When I first got here, the pastors at some of the churches in town, who are very nice and I have nothing bad to say about their character, but also deny that all of the Bible is God’s Word, deny that Jesus died on the cross to pay for sin, and don’t think repentance, sin, grace are that “big of a deal,” asked me to have a joint worship service with them for Good Friday. Would it have been loving for me to do that? No. Not loving to Jesus, to act as if his teaching aren’t “that” big of a deal. Not loving to you, to give you the impression that it doesn’t really matter if what Jesus says is true, not loving to them- to confirm them in their false belief. I know this is a tough teaching, but consider this: When a Christian is willing to divide and be

disliked, shunned, and disowned by others for the truth, that's a powerful witness. When we tell people, "If you aren't united with us in Jesus' teaching, don't come to the table yet- let's unite over God's Word and become united first," it's divisive- but I've had several people- all under 30- say, "wow, you must really care about this." We do. When you tell your family, "I love you, but I cannot worship that. I belong to someone else who gave himself for me," or "I love you, but I cannot support your choices, I cannot go to that wedding, I cannot affirm your beliefs, I love you, but I don't agree with you and I cannot join you in this worship, this prayer, this communion, this action, because I love you and I love Jesus," that's a powerful witness. It may be offensive to some, but you have something, someone who is so great, so wonderful, so good, that he's worth sacrificing for. And I'm convinced, the more students I speak to, the more young people I hear talk about their anxiety, their boredom, their insecurities, their desire for something greater than themselves, something worth sacrificing for, the more I'm convinced that this teaching of loving division is one of our most powerful witnesses to a decaying world: "Hate us if you must. We have a God who took the fire of judgement in our place- any fire we get from you will only refine us and make us more beautiful." Friends, take courage. Amen.