

Good Friday: The Powerfully Divisive Message of Easter

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would just turn your eyes to the passage that we read from John's Gospel, John chapter 12, in our sheets. I'd like to speak about it for a little while this lunchtime.

Because what Jesus is speaking about there is the powerfully divisive message of Easter. Of course, religious divides are a real problem in our world today, and our politicians have increasing problems trying to overcome them.

It's right that they do so. Many parts of our world are riven by these kinds of animosities, and indeed our own part of the world here is no stranger, is it, to the evils of sectarianism.

And we rightly deplore these kind of animosities and divisions. But the great mistake that is made by the secularists who govern us is to try, therefore, to lump all religions together as if they were exactly the same thing.

And as though the solution to these kind of problems were about moderation, moderation in all things. Let's not have any overdoing of religious zeal.

[1 : 09] Keep it all in its place. Keep it all as a matter of private opinion, and then all will be well. Well, of course, that approach is doomed to failure, and we can see that it doesn't work.

Because it relegates faith to the area of mere opinion, mere preference. It gives no thought to the reality that, in fact, it is actually a matter of truth.

The Christian gospel is all about that. It's a matter of truth. Not about opinion, not about preference, not about relative ideas, but truth. Public truth.

Universal truth. Absolute truth. True truth, as Francis Schaeffer once put it. And truth, you see, is always divisive, isn't it? Indeed, in our world, where people all want to have their own truth, even to talk about absolute truth proves to be divisive and very provocative.

People nowadays say things like, well, that might be true for you, but it doesn't work for me. Well and good, but I've got my own truths that work for me just fine, thank you. And people who talk like that, they really want to believe that if we can all unite and be happy with our own truth, then there'll be no strife, no division, we can all live happily together.

[2 : 27] Well, it's one thing to think that, it's quite another thing to actually be able to live as though that were right. Try it, for example, next time when you're caught for speeding on the motorway. When the officer stops you in the car, you say, well, yes, officer, you say I was doing 90 miles an hour.

That might be true for you, but for me, it's certainly true that I was doing 50 miles an hour. And you just see if he says, oh, well, that's fine, that's fine, I'll see you again another time. Oh, and your bank manager tells you that you're overdrawn, and you tell him, well, from my point of view, I've got plenty of money in my account, there's no problem, Mr. Bank Manager.

See what he says about that. In fact, the whole banking crisis that we're experiencing at the moment is due to the fact that banks and politicians seem to have forgotten that there is such a thing as true truth.

As long as we all collude in believing together what we want to believe, everything will be fine. Money grows on trees, or at least on printing presses. Things can only get better. We're all getting wealthier and wealthier, and it'll never change.

We all collude in it, but you see, when somebody then speaks a word of truth into that world of collective delusion, when somebody says, no, it's not true, well, it's very divisive. And they're met usually with great hostility, aren't they?

[3 : 39] And so it is with the message of Easter, the message of the death of Jesus. Because Jesus shouts out into a world of humanity that wants to have to make no decisive response to God, he shouts out the truth.

You can see it in verses 35 and 36 of our reading there in John's Gospel, chapter 12. He says, I am the light. I am the true truth that explains this world.

And while you have the light, you must believe. You must respond to that light. You must decide.

And you see, wherever a claim of truth like that really confronts people, it divides people.

Not so much because the truth can be contradicted, but because it can always be rejected, can't it?

As unpalatable, as unwanted, as inconvenient. Therefore, you dismiss it out of hand very angrily.

Just as the whistleblowers in the banks were dismissed out of hand, and in fact lost their jobs and were sacked, weren't they? When they dared to say to the banking boards, you can't go on like this, there will be a disaster. Well, we will go on like this, and we'll fill our pockets, and we'll love it, and there will be no disaster.

[4 : 46] You're sacked. You see, friends, the Easter message, because it is the word of ultimate truth for our world, is also the word of ultimate division.

It always has been, and it always will be. The message of Easter is a powerfully divisive message. And that's what Jesus himself makes us face up to in these last words that he spoke before he was taken to be crucified.

There is a sense, of course, in which the death of Jesus unites the world. Make no mistake about that. Jesus himself is very clear. John makes a point of telling us that, too. Earlier on, just before this chapter, in chapter 11, he records for us that strange prophecy from the high priest, who spoke much better than he knew, when he said, Jesus would die not just for the nation, for Israel only, but also to gather into one the children of God, he said, who are scattered abroad.

That is, the death of Jesus would unite Jew and Gentiles the world over. John makes that doubly clear a little bit later on in the passage just before the one in our sheets.

See, the people said, the whole world have gone after him. And again, he speaks about Greeks, Gentiles, pagans, non-Jews coming to Jesus. And if you look at verse 32 here, Jesus himself says, I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.

[6 : 13] And one sense of that clearly is that Jesus' great death, his delivering death, does unite believers without distinction, without distinction of race or sex or ethnicity.

He unites them in one true family of God forever and ever, all one in Christ Jesus. That's the great message of the gospel. Jesus' death unites together in himself a worldwide family of faith.

That's true. But there's another side also to those words of Jesus in verse 32. I will draw all people to myself. See, Jesus also means that his death will draw all people without exception and draw them all before him on judgment day as he will judge them.

The gospel of the cross, he is saying, will be and indeed already is a double-edged sword. It will be the instrument of God's judgment. And in the gospel of the cross and in the response that people make to the message of the cross in people's hearts, God's verdict, his verdict upon men and women and boys and girls, on all of us, is being forged.

And humanity is being divided. Divided by their response to Jesus Christ and his claim. Jesus' death and the message of his death divides.

[7 : 43] It always does so because his message is not just a matter of information. It's a matter of power. You see, the word of Jesus' death for sins is a personal word from him, the creator of the world.

And therefore, it is a powerful word. It is a recreating word. It calls people into a real relationship with Jesus Christ and God himself. And it creates that real relationship with Jesus and it calls people to trust him, to obey him, to follow him and to be a new person.

And either you respond and that relationship begins and it grows or you reject that word. And by doing so, you mean that there can be no relationship between you and Jesus Christ.

So that means, you see, there can't be any neutrality about the word of the cross. It exposes the truth and it precipitates that great division. And there are only two ways that are possible.

Well, you might be saying to yourself, how can a mere message, how can a mere word do something like that?

[8 : 51] How can a word about Jesus' death and an explanation of it be so divisive? How can words possibly be so powerful? Well, think about this word.

Will you marry me? That's a sentence I've only ever uttered once. I've never uttered once. But it changed the whole of my life. Markedly for the better, I hasten to add.

And you see, that is a decisive word, isn't it? That word that I spoke either created a relationship or changed it and destroyed it forever. If the answer to that word is yes, well then you open up a whole world of new opportunity.

And every subsequent word, every subsequent communication just develops that and furthers it, doesn't it? But if the answer to that great question is no, well then a door is firmly closed, isn't it? And every subsequent communication only distances those two people more and more. Very sad when that happens, isn't it? But you see, so it is with the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[9 : 56] It is a word like that that creates division depending upon your response to it. And either it subsequently draws you nearer and nearer to God, to the Father himself, or it pushes you further away.

And ultimately, ultimately that separation is absolutely infinite. It's like drawing two lines, just one degree apart.

When you begin to draw them, they look as though they're very, very close together and they're just going to stay the same. But keep them going and eventually, there will be an infinity of separation between those lines, won't there?

And you see, Jesus is ending his whole ministry on earth with exactly that warning. He is saying the word of the cross divides and ultimately, ultimately it will divide forever.

I want you to direct you to the passage really beginning halfway through verse 36, the last paragraph there on the bottom left, explaining this great division.

[11 : 01] It begins there explaining, doesn't it, the unbelief in the face of Jesus' own ministry in his own day. But it ends at chapter 12, verse 50. It ends, doesn't it, with the last day, with a division that is ultimate and forever.

Let's look at it under two sections with two headings. First of all, the gospel of the cross divides people in history. Don't you find verse 37 there astonishing?

Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him. How could there be such unbelief in the face of the very presence of God himself on earth, doing such miraculous signs and speaking such astonishing words?

Such rejection of the Son of God by those who had witnessed what no other people, no generation in history had ever seen. Well, Jesus gives two answers to why that should be so.

Verse 38, you see he says, well, it's always been so. All through Israel's history, God has revealed to them much in word and in deed, and yet the people have refused to believe.

[12 : 09] Lord, who has believed what they heard from us? He's quoting the prophet Isaiah from the midst of one of the great servant songs, Isaiah chapter 53, where God reveals to his people that he is going to send a great servant, a sin bearer, one who will save them from their sins.

But way back, even then, the people just rejected God's message of salvation. They wouldn't have the truth, you see, about the need for a savior from sins.

They were happy to have a glorious king, but the idea that he would have to die to take away their sin was appalling to them. Well, we live 3,000 years after those words roughly were written, and people feel just the same today, don't they?

And they felt just the same in Jesus' day. Jesus himself came at last on his own to reveal everything to the Father, and when he came, John said, he came to his own, but his own received him not. We've been studying in the book of Acts, and in Acts chapter 7, Stephen, before he is martyred, says exactly the same thing. You stiff-necked people, you always, always have resisted the Holy Spirit.

[13 : 19] You've shown it by killing the prophets God sent to you. Now, you kill his only son. No, we don't, they say. And then they pick up stones and stone him.

Well, that's the first answer Jesus gives. It's the perversity of the human heart that rejects God's revelation. And he's not just speaking about Jews. Romans chapter 1, Paul the Apostle makes it exceedingly clear.

All people, he says. Every human being suppresses the truth about God in our hearts. And that's why people will not believe.

But second, you see, Jesus here says in verse 39, it's also God's sovereign doing. They could not believe, says Isaiah. He's quoting Isaiah again, and God makes clear to Isaiah that his word, his

message from God, is going to be an instrument of judgment to divide the people. God himself, he says, will blind their eyes and harden their hearts judicially because, you see, the gospel is God's command. Jesus says that himself in the very last verse, verse 50.

[14:28] And therefore, you see, to refuse a command of the sovereign Lord, well, that's inexcusable. And so God declares his judgment on people's lives by their very refusal of his message.

And it's the same message that Jesus is speaking about in verse 41. He says plainly, Isaiah's message was the gospel about Jesus. He spoke of him and his glory.

And the whole of the Old Testament, the word of the law and the prophets, is also about the coming of Jesus. Isaiah is especially clear about that in so many places. And that message divides.

It divides because God has made it his instrument of judgment. It's always been so, says Jesus, and it always will be so.

But also, God has determined that it shall be so. Because he is sovereign. And where people reject, then he will harden their hearts to judge them.

[15:26] But he's also just. There's no question here of overriding human responsibility. In fact, it's because God is a sovereign who commands a response, that we are responsible for that response.

It's because, you see, in verse 37, they would not believe that in the end, verse 39, they could not believe. It's because their hearts are hardened against God that in the end, God says, well, you've asked for hard hearts.

You've asked for me to remove my word. You've asked to have nothing to do with me. And therefore, I will let you have your request. It's always a matter of the heart, you see.

You can see that in verse 40, can't you? The heart is the organ of understanding. And the heart also is the organ of disbelief and of rejection. Why do people refuse to believe?

Why do people perhaps believe, but not confess it, as verse 42 says? Well, the answer's there in verse 43, isn't it? Because their hearts are possessed by the glory of this world, not by the glory that comes from God.

[16:32] They loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. See, it has to be one or the other, doesn't it? Jesus is always saying that.

Either you love this world and its glories and its possessions and its invitations, and you lose eternal life, or you turn your back on this world and will not give it your heart.

And eternal life can be yours. So Jesus says the gospel divides men and women in history. It always has, and it always will, because it exposes where our hearts really are.

It exposes whether our hearts are really satisfied and filled by the appetites and the priorities and the possessions of this world, the glory that comes from man, or the glory that comes from God.

And if it's the former, we won't believe. And in the end, God simply says, all right, you can have your wish. You shall not believe. That brings us to this last section where Jesus makes equally clear that the gospel of the cross divides people not only in history, but for eternity.

[17:44] Look at that last paragraph beginning at verse 44. The parting of the ways, Jesus says, will become at last infinite. The judgment, he says, that is already being worked out by that division in history will at last become utterly final and utterly public.

It will be clear, he says, to the whole universe that those who reject Jesus and the gospel of his cross are utterly rejecting the only true God and his entire revelation of himself to this world in saving grace.

Now you see, there are many people, and it may be that you're one of them, that says to yourself, well, I believe in God, but I just can't accept the Christian faith. I can't accept that Jesus could possibly be the only way to God.

Why would God do a thing like that? But the answer of Jesus Christ to you, not my answer, but his, is simply this, you're wrong.

If that's what you think. Look at verses 44 and 45. They're plainly clear. Whoever believes in me believes not in me, but in him who sent me.

[18:54] And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come into this world as light. To believe in God, Jesus says, is to believe in me.

To see God is to see me. To know God is to know me. I am the light. That's why I've come. So that whoever believes in me, not in anything else, believes in me, may not remain in darkness.

It's a very divisive thing Jesus is saying. He's saying there is no way out of darkness and confusion by following Buddha or by following Krishna or by following Muhammad or Scientology or anything else.

The way out of darkness into light is only by following Jesus Christ. Jesus says, I came for this, not to judge, verse 47, but to save.

But that's why to reject him and to reject the words of his gospel is so utterly culpable. My words, Jesus says in John chapter 6, are spirit and life.

[20 : 07] You have the words of eternal life in my words, he says. That's what he's saying here again in verse 49 and 50, isn't it? Jesus speaks the words of the Father.

This commandment, verse 50, this word of the cross is eternal life. That's what I'm giving you. That's what I'm commanding you. And to respond now is to find that life and to find the light that will deliver you into eternal life on the last day.

That must mean that conversely to reject that word now is to determine right now that that eternal life will never be yours. That's a very, very grave and bold decision to make, isn't it?

Be clear about verse 48. Look at it again. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge. The word that I've spoken will judge him on the last day.

The gospel of the cross that divides men and women in history will divide them forever in eternity. It will be your judge. And that's why Jesus ends this public ministry of his with an urgent cry, verse 44.

[21 : 24] That's what it means. He cried out passionately, urgently, emotionally. He doesn't say, there it is, take it or leave it. It's neither one thing nor the other to me.

I don't care. And neither do I say that to you friends today. Jesus says, it is a life or death choice. But he cries out and he says, choose life.

Why would you choose anything else? He does command you to choose life. He demands a response from you.

But that command is eternal life. It's a command of grace. Choose life. Choose light. Don't stay in the darkness, says Jesus. These are the last words of Jesus' public ministry.

We never know. It might be the very last words from Jesus that you ever hear in your life. And what he's saying is he longs to be your savior just as surely as he will certainly be your judge.

[22 : 31] He wants to be the one who both delivers you and defines you as his. Who makes you into a true son or daughter of the living God. That's what Jesus wants to be.

Only you only you can choose another judge. The word of the cross that Jesus has already spoken to you and which will judge everyone who rejects it on that last day.

Jesus' death, you see, is a death that divides. It divides now and it will divide at last forever. So on this Good Friday, just listen again to Jesus crying out once more.

I have come into this world as light so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

That's a word of power that will change your future life in this world and in the world to come.

If you give it the answer, yes. And that's what Easter is all about. May God indeed grant us to understand its meaning.

[23 : 50] Let's pray. Father, open our eyes, we pray, to see the light of the one eternal God in the face of Jesus Christ, your Son.

Open our hearts, we pray, to love and to cherish Him. bend our wills that we may surrender everything we are to Him.

And give us grace to walk with Him now, today, in the light of your forgiving love that we may walk with Him forever in the light of your endless day.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.