

## **“Jesus Was a Divisive Figure”**

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**Brian Watson**

It’s almost a cliché to say that we live in a divided country. But we do. We live in a country of people who look at life in very different ways, who want different leaders, different rights, and different cultures. Of course, this really isn’t new. I’ve heard there was this thing called the Civil War. That was before my time, but I do remember living through the “Less Filling, Tastes Great” battles. To be serious, we do live in an age of division, of fighting with words and votes and sometimes weapons. But this is not new.

There’s a part of us that longs for harmony, that wants to have peace. But can we have peace in this age?

Some people think that Christianity is meant to be a religion of peace. But is it? depends how you look at things. Christianity is a religion that does not promote violence. The gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be spread through the sword. Jesus never told his followers to create their own form of government, or to create an army. He didn’t teach his followers to hurt their enemies. Instead, he commanded his disciples to love their enemies and pray for them. Yet Christianity acknowledges there will continue to be evil in this world until Jesus returns and creates a new world. So, Jesus and his apostles taught that there is a legitimate role for government, and part of that role is to bear the sword, to punish evil (Rom. 13:1–7).

Christianity is a religion that brings a certain kind of peace—peace between God and those people who have been reconciled to God through the work of Jesus. But Christianity is also a religion of division. It is polarizing. Some people believe in Christ, while many others reject him. And that has always been the case.

Today, there are many who reject Jesus outright. They want nothing to do with him. And there are many faithful Christians, too. I also find that there are people in between, people who call themselves Christians but who believe in a false Jesus, one who makes peace with everyone. I have heard it said that Jesus would not exclude anyone, or that Jesus built bridges with everyone. Those statements sound nice and honorable. The problem is they’re just not true. I think they’re not true because Jesus didn’t include everyone without conditions. Those people who would be included among the people of God have to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus. They have to follow him. But human nature is such that not all people repent of sins and

follow Jesus. Jesus knew that better than we do. He knew those who would be his people and those who would not. He knew those who would put their trust in him and those who would not. So, he said he did not come to bring peace, but to bring a sword.

We find that statement in the passage in one passage, Matthew 10:34–39. These are the words of Jesus:

<sup>34</sup> Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup> For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. <sup>36</sup> And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. <sup>37</sup> Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. <sup>38</sup> And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.<sup>1</sup>

I'll give us some context for this passage: Jesus has called twelve disciples to himself. And then he sends them out to preach and to heal. He tells them that some people will receive them, but others will reject them. In fact, in verse 16, he says, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." He tells them that they will be persecuted, arrested, flogged. Family members will betray each other, for some will follow Jesus and others will not. This shouldn't surprise them, however, for a student is not greater than his teacher, and if they hate the Master—Jesus—they will also hate his followers.

Jesus also tells them not to fear other people. The worst that people can do is kill you. He says, "Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (verse 28). In other words, he says that we should care more about how we relate to God than how we relate to other people. We should care more about pleasing God than pleasing other people. And the only reason Jesus would say such a thing is because there are people who are against God. If people were not against God, then Jesus' followers wouldn't need to make a choice.

Jesus did not come to bring peace to all, but only peace to those who would trust in him. Instead, he said he would bring a sword—not a real sword. Jesus, in his earthly ministry, did not cause any violence. So, the sword here is metaphorical. He means he would bring division. And that line of division would run right through families. Some members of a family would believe in Jesus while others would not. Many of you have seen that in your own families. Some give

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

their primary allegiance to Jesus. They love him even more than anyone else. And others reject Jesus. This is a difficult truth to accept. Of course, we don't know ultimately who will come to believe in Jesus and who won't. We continue to hope that people around us will believe. We continue to pray for their salvation and share the gospel with them. But the fact is that as long as there's sin in the world, there will be people against Jesus.

That dividing line, as I said, runs right down the middle of families. Jesus knew that, which is why he defined his family in an interesting way. We see this in several passages in the New Testament. One of those passages is Mark 3:31–35:

<sup>31</sup> And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. <sup>32</sup> And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.” <sup>33</sup> And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” <sup>34</sup> And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

Now, I think Mary believed that Jesus was the Messiah. She knew, of course, of Jesus' miraculous conception, and she remembered the promises that were made to her by the angel Gabriel before Jesus was conceived. But Jesus' brothers didn't believe all of that prior to his death and resurrection. Yet the point that Jesus wanted to make is that he was creating a new family. Those who did the will of God—his followers—were his brothers and sisters. They were his new family.

What was it about Jesus that was so divisive? Why did some people believe in him and others not?

Two weeks ago, I taught that Jesus addressed sin. He revealed sin for what it is: evil works of darkness and idolatry. At another time, he told his brothers, “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil” (John 7:7). Think about that: the world hated Jesus—and continues to hate him—because he shows that it is evil. People continue to rebel against God, and when you tell them about Jesus and what he taught, and what his apostles taught, they are confronted with their own sin. We all are. Yet many do not want to be called sinners. They don't want to be told that they are doing something wrong and that they have to change. Many of us like to stay the way we are.

Jesus also confronts us with authority. He taught and acted with supreme authority. As we'll see later on, he is the ultimate authority. And when Jesus says he is Lord, or King, that means that we are not. We are not in control of everything. We are not our own master.

Yet that's not a popular concept. Several years ago, a movie called *Invictus* came out. It was about a rugby team in South Africa that brought the nation together in the wake of apartheid. It starred Matt Damon and Morgan Freeman and it was directed by Clint Eastwood. The title of the movie comes from a poem, which was read in the movie (more than once, if I remember correctly). Here's the poem, written by William Ernest Henley (1849–1903):

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced or cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not show strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

That last couplet might motivate some, as it did in the movie. But if you stop and think about the poem for even a moment, one can see how anti-Christian it is. The narrator of this poem mentions “whatever gods.” But we can know the one true God, because we know Jesus. The narrator says that he has an “unconquerable soul.” Yet Jesus says the soul can be destroyed in hell (Matt. 10:28) and forfeited (Matt. 16:26). The narrator says it doesn't matter how “strait” or narrow “the gate.” But Jesus says the gate is narrow (Matt. 7:14). And Jesus is the Master of everyone's fate and everyone's soul. Frankly, I think it's absurd for any human being to make the claims made in that poem. We are not in charge of many things in our lives, and we are often not in control of how we die.

The idea that Jesus is in charge and that we're not is unpopular. It confronts us. And that is one of the reasons why Jesus is divisive. Craig Blomberg, commenting on that passage in Matthew, writes, "His ministry proved so confrontational that he either attracted people to himself or visibly repelled them."<sup>2</sup>

Another reason Jesus is unpopular is that he teaches about judgment. We'll talk more about this in a few weeks, but the fact is that Jesus taught that the only way to avoid the wrath of God is to follow him. He is the only way to God and the only way to avoid hell. Yet many people think that God doesn't judge, or that Jesus doesn't judge, which is obviously contrary to what we read in the Bible.

Jesus taught that the world hated him. But he also taught that his followers would be hated by the world. So, Christians today tend to be divisive, not because they try to create division, but because we follow Jesus. This is what Jesus taught in John 15:18–25:

<sup>18</sup> "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. <sup>19</sup> If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. <sup>20</sup> Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. <sup>21</sup> But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. <sup>22</sup> If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. <sup>23</sup> Whoever hates me hates my Father also. <sup>24</sup> If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. <sup>25</sup> But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: 'They hated me without a cause.'

Think about that: "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." If we never believed in Jesus, we would all be loved by "the world," the realm of sinful humanity that is in rebellion against God. But those of us who believe in Jesus start to see the world in different ways. We believe different things about the purpose of life, about what is good and what is evil. We look at important issues like life, marriage, and sex differently. We view money and power in a different way. And when we share the gospel with people, we confront them with their sin. Even the softest gospel presentation must include two facts: all of us are sinners and Jesus is the only savior.

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 180.

Another reason why Jesus is divisive is that he taught that there are two types of people in the world. There are those who are children of God and there are some who are not. This is what Jesus indicates in John 8:42–47. At this time, Jesus is in Jerusalem, where he is having a discussion with the Jewish leaders there. It would be better to call that discussion a confrontation. These Jewish leaders assumed they were right with God, and they claim that Abraham, the Father of Israel, was their true father. But Jesus tells them that they are doing the works of their true father.

<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. <sup>43</sup> Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. <sup>44</sup> You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. <sup>45</sup> But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. <sup>46</sup> Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? <sup>47</sup> Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

The Jewish leaders believed they were children of Abraham and children of God. But Jesus tells them they are not. Instead, they are children of the devil, because they lie and they want to destroy Jesus. Satan is the father of all lies and a murder, and his children copy him. Children of God, on the other hand, hear God’s words. They respond to what God says. As Jesus says in John 10:27, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” Real Christians respond to the Bible. Those who are not Christians reject the Bible.

John develops this idea, that there are children of God and children of Satan, in 1 John 3. Children of Satan are marked by their desire to sin. Children of God are marked by their love.

<sup>4</sup> Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup> You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup> No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. <sup>7</sup> Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup> Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup> No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. <sup>10</sup> By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

<sup>11</sup> For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. <sup>12</sup> We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. <sup>13</sup> Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. <sup>14</sup> We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. <sup>15</sup> Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

<sup>16</sup> By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. <sup>17</sup> But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Those who are children of God follow God's example. They practice righteousness, for God is righteous. They seek to do good, to care for their brothers and sisters in need. But those who are children of the devil act like him, lying, hating, destroying, murdering.

We all start out as "sons [and daughters] of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). But God graciously sent his Son to become a human, to live the perfect life and to die an atoning death. He laid down his life for his people. He paid the penalty for their sin, so that they could go free. He took the condemnation that we deserve, enduring God's wrath on the cross. He grants us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15), who makes us into new kind of people, people who put their trust in Jesus.

In the end, there is a dividing line that separates all people. It's not the good people versus the bad people. Each one of us has evil in our minds, our hearts, our pasts. It's not the rich versus the poor, men versus women, Americans versus the world, Republicans versus Democrats. In the end, there will be those who have a right relationship with Jesus and those who reject him.

The idea of drawing lines in the sand, of dividing instead of bringing people together, is very troubling to some people. And I understand, on a certain level. We all want peace. But in an effort to create a false peace, some people ignore Jesus' words. Some churches don't want to have a defined membership, or to say that certain people are in and others are out. They want people not only to join them during their meeting, but for everyone to belong to the church in some way, regardless of what they believe. But as long as people have different ideas, there will be division.

For example, say that a church doesn't take a stand on what marriage is. Some people believe it's a union between a man and a woman, and other believe it can be the union of any

two people. If the church doesn't take a stand, that might create an environment for some people to come and feel welcome, but it will drive others out, people who believe what the Bible says about marriage. So, in the pursuit of peace, there will be a new division created. Again, that will happen as long as we don't agree.

Sometimes, divisions are necessary. We have boundaries and borders for reasons, often to protect the integrity of something, whether that's a church, a household, or a country.

Jesus came to bring about division in order to mark those who are God's people and those who are not. He came to provoke people to take a side. The division is necessary because there are people who are against God. God will one day bring about a final, ultimate division on the day of judgment. Those who refuse to come to Jesus, who refuse to humble themselves, repent of their sins, and follow Jesus, will be cast out, separated from God and his people forever. I think the best way to view the reason for that separation is protection. God wants to protect his people and the perfect world that he is going to create. Those who continue to hate God and rebel against him would do harm to his people and his creation. So, they must go.

But while Jesus brought about division, he also told everyone with ears to hear to come to him. And Jesus was far more than just divisive: he died so that people apart from God can be forgiven and come into God's family. So, the boundary between those who are in Jesus' camp and those outside isn't impenetrable. People can cross that dividing line by seeing who Jesus is, having an accurate assessment of their own lives, including their sin, seeing their need for Jesus, confessing their sin, and giving their lives to Jesus. That takes faith, which isn't something we can generate within ourselves. You can't force yourself to believe something if you don't believe it. But we can do certain things to set the table for faith: we can learn about Jesus, we can take an honest inventory of our lives, we can admit that perhaps we've been wrong. Jesus' words about division might provoke people to do these things.

For those listening, it is important to know there is division. Not everyone is in a right relationship with God. Where do you stand with Jesus? You will either be with him or for him. Jesus once said, "Whoever is not with me is against me" (Matt. 12:30). Choose this day who you will serve.

Jesus is divisive. He divides his people, the children of God, from everyone else. But following Jesus is worth it. He gives us forgiveness of sins so we can enter into a right relationship with God. He gives us eternal life. He gives us hope. Though we will face troubles



and even persecutions, and though we will one day die, we will be with him in heaven. And when he returns to judge and to make all things new, he will recreate the universe. We will then live with him forever in a real, physical world that is purged of all its sin.