



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

November 4, 2012

"On Choosing Jesus: No Middle Ground" (Gospel of Luke Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

When APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) rolled into town last year, I had the chance to have dinner with some Secret Service men. One of them had the job of driving the US President in his special limo.

Halfway through the dinner, it hit me: if you're the driver of the President's limo, once you start to drive, you will only have to brake once, and that is when you get to your destination.

If the President is in your car, you don't have to brake for pedestrians, red lights, stop signs, or even hard turns because no one is going to hit you in an intersection.

In the spiritual world, if Jesus is in your car (or, rather, if you are riding in His car), you never stop. If you are fully obedient to Him, you don't stop, brake, or go in a different direction than where Jesus wants you to go.

In a crazy way, that is a metaphor for today's talk. Once we make the decision to follow Jesus, there should be no stopping. We need to follow Him at whatever speed He wants—slow down when He wants us to slow down, speed up when He wants us to speed up.

But following Jesus may also mean leaving some people. With that preface, let's read our Scripture

passage for today. Jesus said:

Luke 12:49 "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!

Luke 12:50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!

Luke 12:51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

Luke 12:52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;

Luke 12:53 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."

May God bless the reading of His word (even though we are now all shaken up by this).

Upon hearing the passage, we might be thinking, "Wait a minute. I thought Jesus was the great unifier? He brings people together. He teaches us acceptance. He loves people and wants people to love each other."

That's all true! Yes, He can bring together many things, but He is also a great divider in many things. Let's get into the text. It begins with our Lord talking to the Jewish people.

Luke 12:49 "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!

Luke 12:50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!

The passage starts off with a bang. Jesus says, "I came to bring fire on the earth." Here He is talking about the fire of truth. Jesus said:

John 9:39 "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

The Jews at that time thought that God would have one judgment for the Gentiles and another for the Jewish people. But the Jews who thought that Jesus might be the Messiah were shocked to hear that it's not one set of rules for the pagan Gentiles and another set for the Jews. All will be judged in the same way. To use the board game Monopoly as an illustration, no free pass for you to pass *Go* and collect \$200. You might not get \$200, and you might not even pass *Go*!

When the fire of truth comes, it can do two things to whatever or whomever it touches: destroy it or refine it.

When Jesus touched down on earth, He spoke of a way of living. He spoke of love and forgiveness, and judged against religious people. He judged against those who were not on the side of the Jewish underdog and

the outcast—lepers, women, sinners (like adulterous women), embezzlers (like Zacchaeus), and the poor. Jesus even blessed the Roman soldiers who were oppressing the Jews, like the Centurion whose servant was healed by Jesus.

This was the new standard, and the fire of Jesus' judgment burned up old prejudices that hurt, shackled, and burdened people. This fire would be even greater through the Holy Spirit after Pentecost when the fires of renewal swept throughout the world with the Holy Spirit bringing signs and wonders, and people having visions.

If we have chosen to follow Jesus, there should be a burning up of our old ways of how we deal with our anger, our failures, unforgiveness, despair, and our use of money. We are to live as Jesus has taught us in the Bible.

But then Jesus says these interesting and seemingly harsh words:

Luke 12:51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

Luke 12:52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;

Luke 12:53 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."

Now we are getting to the subtitle of my sermon: no middle ground.

When we choose to give our life to Jesus, when we say He is the Lord of our lives, that means He is the Lord of every area of our lives—our thought life, our dreams, our aspirations, our plans of making

money, our plans to recreate and have fun, what we read or view on the computer, how we treat people, how we forgive, and how we handle our addictions.

As we come to know Jesus, we learn more and more that we can't do it the world's way while doing it Jesus' way, too.

Last week I had a nice one-on-one dinner with my son, Quinn, at a nice restaurant in Waikiki since my wife Pam was in California. It was a chance for a dad to be with his son in his senior year before he goes to college when they won't be seeing each other as much.

It was a chance for a dad to share his concern. I said, "When you go to college, Son, there will be peer pressure to do things that you shouldn't do." Whereupon Quinn said to me, "Dad, don't worry. There are some things about me that no one can talk me out of. They are not going to change my mind about God. I am not going to smoke. I won't drink."

And inside my soul there was a huge sigh of relief!

It is our hope for loved ones and ourselves that there is no middle ground when it comes to our faith. Once we declare Jesus as our Savior and Lord, there can't be middle ground. We either do things the world's way or Jesus' way.

Slowly but surely the world is trying to say that Jesus is not important. It wants to forbid Him and make us forget about Him. The world is forbidding Jesus by prohibiting the playing in public venues and stores of Christmas carols that talk about Jesus. Better to play "Frosty the Snowman," "Winter Wonderland," and "Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer" than songs about the One who really reigns in our world—in songs like "Joy to the World."

Government speakers are trying to forbid religious signs to be shown at government events.

Nowadays we can't even use the terms A.D. or B.C. anymore when we talk about dates because A.D. means *anno domini* in Latin (the year of our Lord) while B.C. means "before Christ." So now it is B.C.E. for "Before Common Era" and C.E. for "Common Era."

The world is not only trying to forbid Jesus but also make us forget Him. How can we forget how Jesus Christ has had the greatest impact on humankind that the world has ever known? No one in history has ever come close.

When you really think how much of society is based on Jesus, we have to come to terms with questions like "Who is this man," which is, in fact, the title of John Ortberg's newest book. In this book, John clearly shows how Jesus has changed our society in such incredible ways that there can be no middle ground on how we feel about Him.

Many people have forgotten how much Jesus Christ has influenced society. Here are some of Ortberg's observations:

Normally, when someone dies, his or her impact on the world starts to recede. Steve Jobs just died. What will be the impact of that over the years on Apple?

Ortberg's book says that someone wrote many years ago of how our world had Bob Hope, Johnny Cash, and Steve Jobs. Now we have no Jobs, no Cash, and no Hope. But not with Jesus; He gave us hope.

There was even greater impact as Jesus' disciples spread His message a hundred years after His death, more so than during His life.

Think of it. When Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, Napoleon, Socrates, or Mohammed died, their reputations were incredibly huge. When Jesus was killed in Jerusalem, bookies in Tel Aviv would have bet, “Well, that’s the end of the movement.”

But I contend that no one, no one has had more impact on this world than Jesus, and to follow Him means realizing that there can be no middle ground.

When still alive, Alexander named a city after himself and called it Alexandria. Caesar named a city after himself called Caesarea.

When He lived, Jesus had no place to stay. But today, the names of many cities represent His impact: San Francisco—named after St. Francis, a follower of Jesus; Sacramento—named after the sacraments that remind us of Jesus; San Jose—after Joseph the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus; and Corpus Christi—named after the body of Christ.

Roman emperors and generals tried to name dates after themselves (like “in the third year of Herod the tetrarch” and “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar”). Jesus never tried to create a calendar or impose it on anyone. But what was the impact of this man?

You and I know every day we see a date and the year it is based on when Jesus was born: BC for “before Christ” and AD for *anno domini* or “in the year of our Lord.”

Even the clocks we have today were started because of Jesus. Radical followers of Christ in Medieval Europe called monks invented a clock-like system with the ringing of bells at first light, sunrise, in the middle of the morning, at noon, in the middle of the

afternoon at sunset and at nightfall to remind the monks when to pray

Ortberg notes how the Bible mentions various people named Herod or Herodias who were named after Herod the Great. After Jesus died no one named his or her baby after Him.

But today, who has more babies named after him? Jesus or Herod? And who or what has the name Caesar or Nero? Mostly pizza parlors, hot dogs, and casinos.

No one knew what Jesus looked like, but today there are so many paintings of Him. He and his followers were continual subjects for art starting around 400 AD in Byzantine art. Jesus has been portrayed in so many movies. Thousands of songs have been written about Him. Even Justin Bieber released a new song about Him.

Who is this Man that to follow Him means no middle ground?

He never got married, but the way He treated women created a community that was so friendly to women that women would join God’s community in record numbers. In fact, today, most members of American churches are women.

Jesus never wrote a book, yet it was the community that bore His name that kept education going during the so-called Dark Ages when the classical world was destroyed.

In His name, Christians created incredible educational institutions called Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Yale. Most of the entire western system of education and scholarships would arise because of His followers.

Hospitals were founded by churches, religious orders, and Christian individuals. How many today were founded by Alexander the Great or Caesar?

By the 1500s, there were 37,000 Benedictine monasteries alone that were ministering to the sick. *[Biblemesh Feb. 6, 2012, The Christian Origins of Hospitals]*

The word hospital comes from the French word *hotel-Dieu*, meaning “hostel of God.” *[Ibid]* The hospice system began with the establishment of St. Christopher’s Hospice in the south of London. *[Ibid]*

When Jesus’ followers saw injustice, they took up His name and principles to fight it. They were as varied and distant from each other as William Wilberforce (who fought slavery), Leo Tolstoy, who inspired Mohandas Gandhi, who in turn inspired Martin Luther King Jr., who in turn inspired Desmond Tutu. Who is this Jesus who has changed the world?

Malcolm Muggeridge, a popular British TV commentator, was stunned when he visited Mother Teresa at her leprosarium. He realized that humanists who just want to do good works, do not run leprosaria. Most leprosaria are run by Christ-followers who live sacrificially for Jesus.

People give up so much for Jesus. There is no middle ground. Francis of Assisi gave up his family’s wealth. Augustine gave up his mistress. John Newton gave up his slave trade. Father Damien gave up his health.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that the name of Jesus was “not so much written as ploughed into the history of the world.”

When we realize the impact Jesus has had on this world, it is hard not to take Him seriously.

When we come to know Jesus Christ not just with our intellect but with our heart, we realize that He chose us to be His followers.

When we experience His friendship, His forgiveness of all that we have done wrong, the Holy Spirit will come into us, and we will experience Him as the Comforter and as the Counselor.

We know no one else like Jesus on whom we could put our trust like we can in Him. It is at that point that we say to our friends and to our families, "Jesus is the one I must follow and dedicate the rest of my life to. He is the best thing for me, my family, and my friends."

When Jesus chooses us, and we choose to follow, then indeed we are declaring He is the most important thing in our life, even above our family. This was unthinkable to the Jews and the Romans of the first century.

What Jesus says in Luke 12:51-52 might be unthinkable to our families:

Luke 12:51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

Luke 12:52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;

I am not Jewish; I am Chinese. I understand that for many, it is hard to choose to follow Christ. In my culture, most, if not all, of my Chinese friends became doctors, lawyers, and business people. These are the honored professions, not being a pastor.

My parents were open-minded and could see that I was zealous to go all out for Jesus, and so I got their blessing to become a pastor even though they were not churchgoers, and I was not raised in a church.

According to my friends in Singapore, being a pastor is at the

bottom of the totem pole of status in Singapore. That is also true in China.

In Japan, there are hardly any churches. Only one percent of the population is Christian, so they surely don't know what to do with a pastor.

If you choose to follow Christ, it might divide your family because if you really live all out for Him, then it has to change how you use your money, how you give it away (10% or more for God's work), how you spend your time to help others instead of just yourself, and how you treat others.

I think of my friend who chose to go to work for InterVarsity. His parents were initially not happy. Trusting God for people to donate to your ministry so you can have a paycheck, instead of getting a full-time job where you are assured of getting paid? My friend had to choose what was the right thing to do and if God was indeed telling him to do that.

I think of another friend who chose to be a missionary in Africa. Her father was so upset about her decision that he did not talk to her for decades. That's the division of a family because of Jesus.

Another example of a family getting divided because of Jesus is when a new Christian stops doing certain traditional practices that go against the teachings of Christ, like the Buddhist practice of burning money for the deceased so dead loved ones can have much in the afterlife; or the worship of pagan family gods called amakuas as practiced in the Hawaiian culture.

And so because someone in the family is dedicated to Jesus, a family is divided: a father against a daughter, a mother against daughter.

There was one verse in our passage that I skipped over.

Luke 12:50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!

Jesus wasn't talking about His water baptism by John. No, He was talking about the impending suffering He was about to undergo on the cross. Hence, He was under great stress until He completed that.

On this Communion Sunday, let us not forget that what Jesus went through on the cross was no small thing. Who do you know will literally give his or her life up for you and will be willing to be tortured for you? Maybe less than the number of fingers on one hand. Jesus He is the only one.

Hence, let us truly live lives of no middle ground. Let us all go out for Him. Not in a zealous, judgmental way, but with love and zeal for the One who died for us. I am not saying we all have to be missionaries or work for InterVarsity but that Jesus needs to be above all. He needs to be truly at the center of our lives.

Are we using our faith to fit into the world? Or are we in the world but no longer of it? Are we going all out for Jesus even to the point of disagreeing with loved ones concerning the direction of our lives or what we dedicate our time, talent, and money to?

Are we caught up in the affairs of the world and the temporary acclaim it gives? Jesus said:

Matthew 16: 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

Is today a gut check from God? What's holding you back? He might have something for you to do in His name.

Great movements are started by common lay people. Alcoholic Anonymous was started by followers of Jesus. Same for the International Justice Mission, the Red Cross, the YWCA, and the YMCA.

A radio broadcaster named Charles Fuller started a seminary many years ago, which is now the largest nondenominational seminary in the world. A psychologist named James Dobson started Focus on the Family. A football coach named Bill McCartney started Promise Keepers.

While on a trip to Honolulu, a parachurch worker and filmmaker named Bob Pierce was touched by the sight of a poor and abandoned child. That experience led to a trip to China, where three years later he started two organizations: World Vision and Samaritan's Purse.

All of these people were in the marketplace. In choosing Jesus, they realized there is no middle ground in following Him. They heard his Word, and then acted on it.

When it comes to Communion, we want to say, "Give me Jesus more than anything else." For on the night Jesus was betrayed...
(Communion service follows.)

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