

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 12:49-56

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These sayings of Jesus are confrontational and shocking. Therefore, their sound is loud and harsh. These are not nice sayings, but rather are sayings designed to shock people into thinking. I suggest that these three episodes are all fairly loud. They are addressed to the crowd—a large crowd of thousands of people. The speech is a series of sayings that are structured around time: the time of God's presence, and of the presence of the Son of Man.

Mnemonic Structure of the Episodes

1. The first episode is about fire kindled and baptism completed: "I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled. I have a baptism with which to be baptized and what stress I'm under until it is completed." If you think "fire kindled/baptism completed," you'll have that episode.
2. The next episode is about peace and division: "You think I've come to bring peace to the Earth? No I tell you but rather division." The second sentence is a description of the divisions. The structure of this is easy to remember: five in one household divided in two ways: 3 to 2, 2 to 3, father/son, son/father, mother/daughter, daughter/mother, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law/mother-in-law; that is, father/son, mother/daughter, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law. The numbers and the people are two different examples of division and are not otherwise related.
3. The last episode is about weather forecasting. The first one is "You see a cloud in the West, you say it can rain, it happens." "You see the south wind blowing, you say there will be scorching heat, it happens." So the structure is when you see, cloud/ South wind, you say it's going to rain/heat and it happens. The conclusion to this is then "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

The mission of the Son of Man, which is the subject of the first part of this speech, is related to a theme established early in the Gospel: John the Baptist talking about the fire. John said, "He will be like a burning fire..." This beginning is related to the theme of the mission of judgment and purging that John the Baptist identified. This is a very Baptist episode focused on the mission of the Son of Man, the mission of Jesus to establish the kingdom of God.

The second part describes the impact of this new government. One of the themes that runs through the whole of the Gospel of Luke is that the government or rule of God, the coming of the Son of Man, will establish peace. Thus, in the birth narrative, the angels

announce peace. That is a dimension of the story throughout the Gospel, but in this instance Jesus is talking about a dimension of the mission that will not bring peace but rather division—division in households, division between fathers and sons and mothers and daughters and mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. That division is around whether or not people will believe in and follow Jesus and will believe in the government of God and change their lives in relation to that new reality.

What Jesus describes has happened throughout the history of Christianity and the history of the world ever since. There have been divisions over Jesus, divisions over what does the government of God mean, resulting in various Christian denominations. There has been division in families. It happened in my family, it happens in many families. Two things that people can't talk about in families are politics and religion because people get into big fights. Jesus is describing a reality of our experience.

The last episode focuses on people being so aware of the weather, and so in touch with what is happening in regard to the weather, but being unaware or unable to interpret the present time. So the saying is, "When you see a cloud rising in the West..." In Jesus' context that meant in Galilee, when you see clouds out over the Mediterranean Sea, then you know that there is a front coming that will bring rain. That is what Elijah saw when he was up on Mt. Carmel. He was looking over the Mediterranean Sea and he saw a cloud coming and knew that rain was coming after the long drought.

The south wind is the wind that comes off the Arabian Desert. In Israel, now as well as then, when there is a south wind, it is bad news. It means there will be incredible heat. The siroccos off of the Arabian desert frequently have temperatures of 110° and 120° with a very strong wind and sometimes sand. They bring terrible periods of weather in which crops can be burned out in a couple days. Scorching heat here is describing a real experience in Galilee. It's not all that cool a lot of the time anyway, but when there is a south wind, it is really hot. Jesus is simply naming the weather forecasting that was going on between people all the time when they would see clouds in the West and know rain is coming and when there was a south wind, the scorching heat was on its way.

The focus is that we are really good at paying attention to the weather. Now we have *The Weather Channel*. There are people who sit and watch the weather all the time because they're just fascinated about what's happening with the weather. Why is it that people are so fascinated by the weather but are not able to interpret the present time in relation to the coming of the presence of the government of God in the world? Many people don't pay attention to that. Jesus' teaching here is, "Pay attention." Pay attention to what's happening in relation to the government of God and the presence of God's spirit in the world: personally, in your communities and your families, and in the wider world. This is a series of sayings that are related to Jesus' overall theme of thinking back from the future and the government of God to what's happening in relation to God's government now.