

Text of a message delivered by Aidan Wivell at Windsor Park Baptist Church on Sunday 12th April 2026.
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Decisions & Divisions

Luke 12:49-13:9

Last week we celebrated Easter and our theme was “**For All**”. On the Friday remembering that Jesus died for all and on the Sunday that he rose for all and invites all to His table. Scripture backs up the “for-all-ness” of God’s love:

- ***John 3:16 – For God so loved the world***
- ***Romans 6:10 - The death he died, he died to sin once for all***
- ***Hebrews 10:10 - we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all***

In an age when we are far quicker to cancel, than we are to forgive; and in times of increasing polarisation where we are prone to vilify those who disagree with us – Easter was a much needed reminder that no one is beyond the reach of Jesus’ outstretched arms on the cross, and no one is too messed up to be invited to His table.

One of the themes of Luke’s gospel we have highlighted consistently is **radical inclusivity**. Those of us with inclusion in our top strengths rejoice! We love our inclusive God.

However, as we return to chapter 12 of Luke today’s passage may feel like a rude awakening. As we rejoin Jesus on the road to Jerusalem the intensity is really picking up. There is an unmissable urgency to Jesus’ communication here.

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Our section for today involves five short teachings which follow directly on from the section on being ready for Christ's return, which Grant unpacked before easter. Let's get into it starting with chapter 12 verse 49.

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." (Luke 12:49-53)

Inclusivity & Division

I told you it was confronting! Has Jesus lost his job description? He's meant to be the Prince of Peace and he's saying he's come not to bring peace but division. How does this fit with the radically inclusive God we celebrated over Easter who is for all? Perhaps we can think about it like this...

Imagine the prodigal son story but with *five prodigals*. Each has rebelled against their father and they are living far from their family home. They are *separated from their father* but *united in their rebellion*. The father longs for all five of his children to come home. His arms are open wide for any who will come. Eventually two decide to return to the father and he welcomes them wholeheartedly. Heartbreakingly for the family, and especially the father, the other three never return. The *inclusion of the father* has now *divided the children*, because some have come home, and some haven't.

So we could say in the case of God that *division* is an *undesired consequence* of his *inclusion*.

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Open arms are the primary posture of God. Division is a consequence of individual choice.

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Decisions create divisions. Our world doesn't like to acknowledge this anymore. We prefer a false peace of relativism where both our truths can be true but Jesus doesn't give us this option.

As we move into the next section we seem to be coming to a crunch time, a decisive moment in history, and he calls his listeners to interpret the times.

Signs of the Times

He said to the crowd: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? (Luke 12:54-56)

Back in ancient Palestine there were no weather reports. No TVNZ's Dan Corbett to be "with you after the sport" and no weather apps or met service to assess before making your plans. Jesus' listeners were highly skilled at reading weather patterns but what they seemed unable to read was the *spiritual climate*. Again Jesus' makes his key point through a question: ***How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? (12:56b)***

In sport it's said that "the clock determines the play". What this means of course is that the time in the game, dictates what the best strategy is. What is appropriate in the first 5 minutes, might not be the best option in the last 5 minutes. Jesus' is saying to his listeners, and by extension to us, that we need to understand the times we are living in – because that will help us choose our course of action.

This scripture can often go hand in hand with end times predictions, so we need to make the distinction between our time and the first century.

- In the **original context** Jesus' is referring to time he's in. He literally says ***"this present time"***. He's referring to his arrival as the long awaited messiah, his ministry, his coming death which he has already predicted twice in Luke's account, and destruction of Jerusalem which would come about in 70AD.

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- **We live in a different time.** The things Jesus was referring to have already happened and we're reading about them.

The **specific application** of this teaching was for people back then, but there is a **general application for Christians of all times** to understand the times in which they are living. This is sometimes called cultural discernment. And when we think about our time, the wars, the economy, the environment, the uncertainty – we can quite quickly get overwhelmed.

We may feel like Frodo with the ring despairing to Gandalf:

“I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.”

To which the wise old man responds:

“So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”

We don't get to decide when we live, where the clock is at, but we are responsible for reading the signs around us and living appropriately. There are lots of ways to do this but here are three things that help me practice **cultural discernment**.

1. Bible & Newspapers

There's a classic saying that we hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other hand. Maybe the saying today should be to hold the bible in one hand and *newspapers (plural)* in the other hand. We need diverse sources of news to avoid being fed a one-sided account the world. The BBC has always been my go-to news source, but I made the intentional decision to follow Qatar based Al Jazeera a few years ago and try to read pieces from different perspectives domestically as well.

2. Rebuilders Podcast

Produced by Red Church in Melbourne the Rebuilders Podcast helps me understand the big picture of global events and think through it from a Christian perspective. If you can do one thing I would suggest this.

3. Listen for Repetition

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On a more personal level. I try to make a habit of listening for common themes in media, advertising, and conversation which over time teach me about the times we are living in. What words or phrases are repeated? For example when I was telling people I was leaving my career in football to train for ministry, a phrase that came up again and again, from people from all walks of life, was “it’s important to follow your heart” – that told me something about the world.

Having asked his listeners to interpret the times, Jesus now continues to tell them what they should do with the information.

An Out of Court Settlement

“Why don’t you judge for yourselves what is right? As you are going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled on the way, or your adversary may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.” (Luke 12:57-59)

The times require urgent action. Time is running out and Jesus gives the example of seeking an out of court settlement. Instead of being dragged through the courts and being found guilty – Jesus urges listeners to reconcile before it even gets to court.

Although this instruction could be applied on a horizontal dimension (with other people), it seems from the context that Jesus is talking about settling our account with God. Reconciling our horizontal relationship. Again, the key is in the question: ***“Why don’t you judge for yourselves what is right?” (v57)*** It’s decision time and *you can’t delegate this decision*. One day we will each stand before God the just judge. Before we get to our hearing, God in His mercy has given us time to plead guilty, and to accept Jesus’ as our saviour. But that window of opportunity won’t last forever.

Revolution or Repentance

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As we move into chapter 13 things take a political turn as reports arrive of Jewish oppression:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (Luke 13:1-5)

Read in the context the report that comes to Jesus is a political statement, potentially even a set up. Those bringing up Pilate’s oppression would be expecting Jesus to condemn Rome and the oppression of his people. It would be like kind of like going up to a Palestinian pastor today and telling them about the latest fatalities at the hands of Israel bombs. You’d expect grief, outrage, condemnation – you’d expect a reaction. That’s what the Jewish crowd wants. Particularly those would be revolutionaries who are ready to rebel. They’ve just heard Jesus saying he’s not come to bring peace but division and they like the way that sounds.

When you think about it from this vantage point Jesus’ response is shocking. Kenneth Bailey specialized in Middle Eastern New Testament studies and lectured in Beirut. He said that when he taught this section to middle eastern students, they were often shocked Jesus was not physically attacked for these words. Jesus refuses to get drawn into a political movement, and while not condoning Pilate’s brutality, he instead calls for repentance from those in front of him.

Bailey paraphrases Jesus’ response this way:

You want me to condemn the evil in Pilate. I am not talking to Pilate. He is not here. I am talking to you. Evil forces are at work in your movement that will destroy you, Pilate or no Pilate. You must repent or all of you will be destroyed by those forces.

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Jesus also introduces a natural disaster, the tower falling on people, saying in effect, death can come from many directions. Whether through oppression or terrible luck or natural processes, we'll all end up going the same way – so repent while there's time!

In the final section of our passage Jesus tells an intriguing parable about an unfruitful fig tree in a vineyard.

“As Go the Leaders...”

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’” (Luke 13:6-9)

This parable is full of symbolism and Old Testament context and when we dive into those we discover some keys to interpreting Jesus' words. If you'd have played word association with Jesus' original audience and you said "vineyard" they wouldn't have said "Waiheke", they would have said "Israel". Isaiah 5 describes an unfruitful vineyard and verse 7 says clearly: ***The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel (Isaiah 5:7)***. So they know as soon as this parable gets going we're talking about Israel.

But now think, where is the problem in the parable? Is it the whole vineyard? No. The problem is with a fig tree. And the owner of the vineyard does not want to destroy the vineyard he wants it to flourish. We can see his concern for the whole vineyard, when he asks about the unfruitful fig tree ***“why should it use up the soil?”***

Most scholars agree that **the fig tree represents Israel's leadership**. So, Jesus is here critiquing the unfruitful leaders of the people of Israel and saying that they are compromising the state of the nation. In today's language we say *“as go the leaders, so goes the church”*. But even with the unfruitful fig tree, the owner and the worker negotiate a plan. They give the fig tree more time and assistance to bear fruit. Despite the clear urgency of the passage, we

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still see God's patient endurance giving even corrupt leadership every opportunity to repent and become true leaders.

Of course, all of us as Christians are called to produce fruit, but read in context, this passage is most directly applicable to those of us in church leadership. So I say this to myself and those who consider themselves spiritual leaders within this church:

As go the leaders, so goes the church. If we use up the ground without bearing fruit ourselves, we compromise the fruitfulness of the community. God in his grace is patient, and helps us, but we won't wait forever.

Conclusion

Okay we've covered a lot! Five teachings taking us from divided families, to weather reports, to out of court settlements, to the horrors of Pilate and falling towers, and finally to a waste of space fig tree. As Jesus' journey to Jerusalem gathers speed and intensity Jesus urges people to follow him while there is still time. He requires everyone to make a decision and as Grant pointed out a few weeks ago, ultimately not making a decision is still a decision. In the end some choose Him. Some don't. Decisions create divisions.

For us, although some of Jesus' words have already come to pass, the challenge of these teachings still rings true. Perhaps we can summarise our learnings this way:

- We still need to **discern the times**.
- We still need to **decide** daily to follow Jesus.
- We still need to **repent**.
- We still need to **bear fruit**, *especially in positions of leadership*.
- And we still need to **accept division** as a natural, if unfortunate consequence, of faithfulness to an unpopular and uncoercive God.

Let's pray and then we'll close by singing the decisive words of the song "yes I will".

Declaring decisively and defiantly, that come what may, we will choose Jesus.

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Reflecting on Easter Sunday 5th April 2026: On Easter Sunday Grant celebrated Jesus' habit of dining with the "wrong" people! Who have you had a chance to host around your table this week? Or what barriers have gotten in the way?

These questions help you think more about this message. We hope they might be a conduit for conversation and reflection, encouraging us to wrestle with how this message might practically work itself out in our lives.

1. Can you describe a time you've had to make an unpopular **decision** that led to **division**?
2. Where do you get your **news** from? What does (or could) it look like to read outside of your comfort zone?
3. In Matthew 3:8 John the Baptist combines two key ideas from this sermon, **repentance** and **fruit** when he calls the crowds to ***"produce fruit in keeping with repentance."*** What do you think he meant? What might it mean for you?
4. What is one area of your life where you feel in a position of **leadership**? How can you ensure your leadership has a positive influence on the whole?

If you'd like to chat with someone about your spiritual journey or anything else going on in your life, please contact us at care@windsorpark.org.nz; **we're better together and no perfect people are allowed.**

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Below are some further resources that may take the message further and deeper and enable you to explore other viewpoints on the same theme. We also encourage you to engage with the preacher if there are further questions you have or if you'd like clarification on anything. Email info@windsorpark.org.nz and we'll direct your query to the appropriate person.

1. My number one recommendation for interpreting the times we live in today is **Rebuilders Podcast** produced by Mark Sayers and Red Church in Melbourne. For over 5 years it's helped me comprehend the craziness of the world from a thoughtful Christian perspective.
<https://rebuilders.co/podcast>
2. Many Christians around the world experience the full extent of the division Jesus talks about as a consequence of their decision to follow Jesus. **Open Doors** is an organisation that exists to serve the persecuted and strengthen the Church. You can find out more about the state of Christian persecution worldwide and support here:
<https://opendoors.org.nz/>
3. Check out this recent article by Matt Burrows in the NZ Herald which tracks the state of **Christianity in NZ** and features the stories of **three recent converts** (two of which attend our church). It's premium but if you can't read the article you can still watch the video!
<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/easter-miracle-nz-churches-claim-youth-attendance-boom-in-global-quiet-revival/premium/DXPEM6BARJHHBA7WRLUVN77B4E/>