

The Testing of the Fire

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the profound implications of fire as a symbol of judgment and testing in the Christian life, emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in discerning spiritual truths and the nature of human relationships.

Scripture: Luke 12:49

Topics: "Judgment", "The Work of the Holy Spirit"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the profound implications of Jesus' statement about casting fire upon the earth, emphasizing that this fire symbolizes judgment and division, particularly in human relationships and Christian work. He highlights that the Holy Spirit's presence brings about a necessary discrimination between light and darkness, revealing the true motives of the heart and the quality of one's work for Christ. Sparks warns that not all sincere efforts in ministry will endure the testing fire, as only those led by the Holy Spirit will stand the test of time. He encourages believers to be sensitive to the divisions created by the Spirit, which reflect a deeper spiritual reality. Ultimately, the sermon calls for unity in the Spirit, emphasizing that true Christian life is marked by a singular focus on being governed by the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

We return again to our basic passage of Scripture:

"I came to cast fire upon the earth: and would that it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished! Think ye that I am come to give peace in the earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division: for there shall be from henceforth five in one house divided three against two, and two against three. They shall be divided, father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against her mother; mother in law against her daughter in law, and daughter in law against her mother in law" (Luke 12:49-53).

I confess that is one of our Lord's utterances that I least like, and that I find myself most unhappy to speak about. If anyone else but He had said it, perhaps we should have turned away. I am quite sure that if that had originated with myself, or with any of my brethren, it would have caused very great offence. But He said it. And it seems to me to be all of a piece with the beginning of that statement.

Perhaps you have noticed that this marks a very abrupt change in the whole course of the narrative. Up to the end of verse 48 you seem to have been on one thing: and then quite abruptly there is this change. I can only think that there was a pause on His part. He said that; and then He was quiet for a moment, and

His mind ranged the future - the future of His own influence and effect upon the world. And then He began this part of His utterances, in a quite different, strange realm.

"I came to cast fire upon the earth...". 'That is why I came; that sums up the meaning of My coming. Why did I come? For what did I come? What is to be the outcome and the issue? I came to cast fire upon the earth... and how am I pent up, straitened, limited! What do I want? What is it that is necessary? I have a baptism to be baptized with, and I would that it were over! I wish that were accomplished and then I should be free of this straitness and this limitation. The purpose for which I have come could be realized. Oh, that it were already accomplished - this baptism of the Passion, of the Cross!' So He thinks and so He speaks. I have said that this paragraph, from verse 49 to verse 53, seems to be all of a piece. We see here the effect of the fire, and it is very terrible. It introduces the element of judgment. There is no need to argue with anyone who knows anything about the Bible that fire in the Bible is so often the symbol of judgment - as here.

JUDGMENT

But we need to comprehend the meaning of that word 'judgment'. We so often limit it to one of its aspects, especially the final one. We speak of 'bringing to judgment' - meaning by that, to punishment - the final effect of judgment. But judgment in the Bible is a more comprehensive word than that. It is, to begin with - and this can be clearly seen in terms of fire, or fire in terms of judgment - a trying of things, a putting them to the test. Now Scriptures will leap to your mind which bear that out. Fire tests, the fire tries, the fire finds things out, does it not? That is the first effect of fire. And that is the first meaning of judgment: to put everything to the test, to try it.

Having done that, it discriminates: that is, it divides; it shows to which category things belong, and it puts them there. Fire has that effect. It says: That is of that kind, and it belongs to that kind; it is of that category, or that realm, or that kingdom: this belongs to another. Fire finds out: it discriminates and it divides.

And then it relegates finally. It says: that has been found to belong to a certain realm; it has been designated, it has been discriminated; it belongs there, we put it there. That is the final effect of the fire.

That is the content of the word 'judgment'. We need always to keep that full meaning in mind when we use the word. We will not dwell upon its application more fully at the moment.

We are told in the Word of God that this judgment - which would come, mark you, with the coming of the Holy Spirit - the effect of Christ's release through the Cross, in the coming of the Holy Spirit was to cast fire. In other words, the effect of Christ's release would be the coming of the Spirit as the Spirit of fire; and as the Spirit of fire His presence would always be in terms of judgments in this threefold sense of the word. The Holy Spirit's presence is like this and it has this effect. Let us now look into the Word to see the realm in which that operates.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Here in chapter 12 of Luke's Gospel we have it operating in one realm. We read those terrible words: "Think ye that I am come to give peace in the earth? I tell you, Nay, but rather division." The word in the old Authorized Version is "a sword". Division! It sounds terrible, and we are on very delicate ground, we have to be very careful. But He goes on to explain what He means by division: "There shall be from

henceforth five in one household divided, three against two, and two against three." And then He gives examples of division in the family. Here the fire is at work in the realm of human relationships.

Now let me say here at once, in parenthesis, and with considerable emphasis, that this has nothing to do with outward divisions within the Church, divisions amongst those who are in Christ. That is not what the Lord is speaking about or pointing to. He is thinking in a totally different realm, in the spiritual realm. This division takes place entirely upon a spiritual basis. The divisions as we have them in the first letter to the Corinthians are because of other things amongst believers that are not spiritual, but this is a spiritual division, essentially and basically.

Perhaps the classic illustration or example of this is the one that we have in the early part of the Old Testament, in the case of the Levites. You will call to mind how, when they had reached the wilderness, Moses was called up into the Mount. He was there so long that the people came - I think deliberately placed by God - under a very severe test, as to where their hearts really were: whether they were after their own interests or after God's, their own ends or His; whether their hearts were in this matter with the Lord, or whether their hearts were set upon their own gratification and pleasure. They were put to the severe test of that probationary period of the forty days and forty nights in which Moses was in the Mount, and they broke down under the test. When Moses came down, hearing the noise in the camp, you remember what had happened - the calf and the dancing. "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt."

Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and cried: 'Who is on the Lord's side?' "Whoso is on the Lord's side, let him come unto me." 'And all the sons of Levi went over to him. And he said, Gird every man his sword upon his side, and go in and out and slay every man his brother, every man his friend.' The sword, the fiery sword, has come into the realm of human relationships. It is finding out where the heart is, testing the heart; it is discriminating between motives, "the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12); and it is putting these people in the category to which they belong. Here are the Levites, who have been put to the test and have come through triumphantly, and for evermore they stand as representing the full, pure thought of God concerning His people. The point is that this work of judgment, of the fire, of the sword, came into the realm of human relationships, to find out the motives of the heart.

You can take that into Luke 12. That is just what it means. The divisions, even within the family, the home, the household, will be made by the Holy Spirit on this matter of the relationship of the heart. We can see, as we read the story of Israel in the wilderness, that the heart of that nation, that generation, as the Psalmist said, "was not stedfast with God" (Psalm 78:8b). In their heart they lusted after Egypt - the fleshpots of Egypt. Their heart was back there, even while they were in the wilderness; and that generation never entered the Land, because its heart was not with the Lord. It is a matter of inward division, a division in the heart.

Now the Holy Spirit is always a divider in that way; it is a work of the Holy Spirit to do that. In a sense - not in the wrong sense, and be careful how you take me up - in a sense the Holy Spirit is the cause of divisions. There is a realm in which He is the divider.

Let us take our Bible and go right back to the beginning. The Spirit of God brooded upon the chaos, the darkness, the void. What was the first thing done by and through the Holy Spirit? Dividing between things: a process of division between light and darkness. "And God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness Night" (Genesis 1:4-5). And then God divided between the heaven

and the earth. He divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament" (1:7). They had got too near; one was right down on top of the other, so that you could not discern or discriminate between the clouds of the heavens and the waters upon the earth. He put the firmament - an expanse, a space - between: and He called it Heaven. In the same way He separated the dry land from the waters, and He "called the dry land earth; and... the waters called He seas" (1:10). And He "saw that it was good."

Now there are Old Testament things which have, as we know, a New Testament meaning. These are found in their counterpart in the new creation. And when you come to the book of the Acts, the book of the Holy Spirit at work in relation to the new creation, you find all the way through that divisions are taking place as a result of the Holy Spirit's activity. Indeed, you may say that that is the characteristic of the Spirit's work right through the New Testament: a dividing between light and darkness; a judging and a pronouncing. 'That is darkness - that is one realm, and that is light - that is another realm; and these two can never, in the right and proper way, obtain together, they cannot co-exist. They are separated and belong to two entirely different categories.' The Spirit of God has done that.

Interpret that spiritually, and you see what it means. What a tremendous amount there is bound up with that in spiritual life! It works out in this way, that anyone - and this is the test - who really has the Spirit is very sensitive to light and very sensitive to darkness. They know quite well about the big division that God has made; and, when they touch anything that belongs to the darkness realm, they feel the darkness in their own spirit, they know they have touched darkness, they know they have come into another realm. That is a work of the Spirit, and a very important work indeed.

On the other hand, anyone who has the Spirit will be equally sensitive to light. When there is true light - we will define that in a moment - the spiritual man or woman at once leaps to it. Why? Because this kind of light is not cold light: it is the light of fire - it is living light, that has energy in it. You can have light, but it is cold. You can have imitation fire, but it is cold - like those things that you switch on, with the imitation of glowing coal, but it does not make any difference, other than psychologically! You see the thing, and perhaps you imagine something, but really it is all an illusion. And you can have that kind of light, but it is imitation, it is artificial, it is false. You can switch it on and equally quickly switch it off. But that is not the light of fire, which is energetic. And the light of the Spirit, the light of God, the light of Christ, is always living, energetic light. When you and I who have the Spirit come into touch with light, it is not that we become mentally and intellectually interested, fascinated, charmed or captivated. It is that something within us leaps up and responds, because we have met energy.

These are marks of the Spirit, judging which is which and what is what, what belongs to this realm and what belongs to that; and these things are set apart: so that it is something quite abnormal if darkness comes into the day or light into the night. It is not the ordinary course of things at all. Do you see the point? You can have those differences of kingdom or realm within your own family, your own household, and there can be no fellowship at all because there is the division which is made by the Holy Spirit Himself. Many can confirm and testify to this from their own experience, and some are suffering because of it. But the point is that is how it will be if the Holy Spirit comes in, and the Lord Jesus was faithful and honest enough to let it be known that that is how it would be. You cannot avoid it, you cannot get over it, you cannot bridge it. It is painful, but it is a mark that the Spirit has done something. Would that we, as the Lord's people, might be more and more sensitive to those different realms which are put apart by the Spirit of God! It is a mark of growth in the light of the Spirit to become more and more sensitive to what belongs here and what belongs there.

You may remember that on two different occasions Paul used that phrase: "the things which differ" (Romans 2:18; Philippians 1:10); and he said it to believers. He would have them know, as Christians, the things that differ. That was the true kind of division that ought to have existed at Corinth. The other was a false and a wrong division; but this was where things had got mixed up. Day and night had been all mixed up together; things which belonged to the night were present among the "sons of the day" (I Thessalonians 5:5), and they were not sensitive to them. And so the first letter to the Corinthians has so much about the Holy Spirit - the real effect and work of the Holy Spirit. We must recognize that the life of the Spirit is a life of spiritual dividing; the course of the Spirit-governed life is that of discerning, being sensitive to the things that differ.

CHRISTIAN WORK

The next application of this is to the whole matter of Christian work. Paul speaks about this in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 3.

"According to the grace of God which was given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder I laid a foundation; and another buildeth thereon. But let each man take heed how he buildeth thereon. For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid which is Jesus Christ. But if any man buildeth on the foundation gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, stubble; each man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire itself shall prove each man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work shall abide which he built thereon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire" (I Corinthians 3:10-15).

And we place alongside of that a passage from the letter to the Hebrews:

"Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying. Yet once more will I make to tremble not the earth only, but also the heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that have been made, that those things which are not shaken may remain. Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken..." (Hebrews 12:26-28).

Here we come into the realm of values in life - in life's work; and the discrimination is brought in by the fire. The fire tries "of what sort it is". And remember, this is addressed to Christians. It is not addressed to those who are doing their work, following their profession, as people of the world. This is addressed to Christians, and it is speaking about Christian work: Christ as the foundation, and the work that you do on that foundation. Paul is saying about Christian work that there is one realm which will abide the fire, and there is another realm - in Christian work - which will go up in smoke: it will be proved that all that was for nothing: the worker will just get into heaven, and that is all! Saved - yes - "so as through fire".

Here is a division which the Holy Spirit makes in the realm of Christian work. If we want to sum it all up, really get to the heart of it, it just amounts to this: Only that which is done by and through the Holy Spirit Himself will remain, will abide the test, will be "found unto praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:7). There can be a tremendous amount of activity and energy, of work and works, engaged in by Christians in relation to Christ, at least in intention, which comes into this category of being consigned to the fire, disappearing in the flames, and leaving the worker at the end with nothing for all his toil.

This is what was happening in the book of the Acts. Look through this book and see the discrimination that is being made. Yes, a discrimination is truly being made. Oh, how those Judaizers laboured! How they

travelled and compassed sea and land! It must have cost them quite a lot to make those long journeys. Their movements were far and wide. You are forced to conclude, not only that they were men who meant business, but that, so far as they understood themselves and their position, they were what we would call sincere men. I do not see very much difference between these Judaizers who pursued Paul wherever he went and gave their very lives to this sort of thing, and Saul of Tarsus as he was. It is just what he was doing; he was one of them.

"I verily thought..." - 'I truly thought'; if you like, 'I honestly thought' - "with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9). That is the utterance of an honest man, of a sincere man. 'I verily thought that I ought... I considered this thing: this was no mere impulse, this was no mere fanaticism. I thought' - Paul was a man who thought - 'I thought that I ought... It was a matter of conscientious conviction with me that this was what I ought to do, that it was the right thing to do, that I was called upon to do it. It was a matter of conscience with me. I verily thought within myself that I ought...'

Yes, but how possible it is to be as utterly sincere as that and as utterly mistaken! The Judaizers were like that. But their work did not last. Here is the work of the Spirit going on: and it has gone on, and it is still going on. It has stood all the testing and all the trying out, and it survives the fire - the fire of judgment, the fire of testing. It has proved itself to be the work of the Spirit. It shows the supreme importance, as the key to the whole of this thing - not of being sincere, not of being enthusiastic, not of acting on the basis of conscientious conviction - but of being governed by the Holy Spirit. That is the important thing! It is only that that lasts.

This all comes into the realm of Christian work. Perhaps you may have felt a little catch just now about the Judaizers: but you have got to concede them quite a lot, you know. These Judaizers were not anti-Christian. What they really wanted was Jewish Christianity - a Christianity with a Jewish complex. They are prepared to have Christianity, if only Christianity will conform to the Jewish order, to the Jewish pattern. I am not going to argue that out now, but I could bring forward much evidence to show that that is so. Paul shows by his letter to the Galatians that that is not the work of the Spirit. It is something quite different.

CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY

The next thought here takes us into the realm of Christian testimony: the fire at work in the realm of Christian testimony. We turn to a very well-known passage:

"But thanks be unto God, which always leadeth us in triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest through us the savour of his knowledge in every place. For we are a sweet savour of Christ unto God, in them that are being saved, and in them that are perishing; to the one a savour from death unto death; to the other a savour from life unto life" (II Corinthians 2:14-16).

There is the dividing effect of the fire. You know the picture, the background. Paul is thinking in terms of the Roman procession, the triumphant General leading his prisoners in his train, holding celebrations of his victory from place to place. At every such place the altar was erected, the fire was lit, the flame leapt up, and the incense filled the air, and that had a double effect. There were some who were in the way of perishing, and that was the place where they would perish; they will be sacrificed there. There are others who are not in the way of perishing: they will pass that fire and go on; they will be saved. The background, you see, is very vivid. The fire is discriminating and determining here.

But Paul says that this is the dual effect of the Holy Spirit in our life and ministry, as we go from place to place. Something happens everywhere and every time. One or both of two things happens in every place. On the one hand, those who refuse the light, who persist in fighting against the victorious Lord, who resist the Holy Ghost, are brought to condemnation: they are put into the category to which they belong - condemned. On the other hand, those who believe, those who accept are, by the same Holy Spirit, brought into liberty. They pass the testing fire and go on in life. "To the one a savour from death unto death; to the other a savour from life unto life."

Now the point is this: Paul is saying that this is the effect of the Holy Spirit in our ministry and in our testimony. In other words, the Holy Spirit never leaves things as they were. The presence of the Holy Spirit always brings about some kind of a crisis and verdict. If the Holy Spirit is present, speaking, we cannot be the same afterward as before. Some thing has happened. We are either more hardened or more softened; we are either more condemned or more saved. In the presence of the Holy Spirit something happens; the fire does this work of judging.

This is what the Lord Jesus meant when He spoke of 'casting fire upon the earth'. What will the fire do? Well, it will make this division, it will bring this judgment; it will determine things and people and their destiny. We know how true that is in history. That is the effect of the Holy Spirit. But what I want to underline in that particular connection is this: If you and I are really men and women who are governed by the Spirit and filled with the Spirit, the effect of our presence and our passing this way will be to leave things otherwise than they were before. There will be eternal verdicts reached by our having gone this way. That is, of course, the object of ministry. 'Thanks be unto God who leads me on from place to place to celebrate His victory.' The effect is either the one thing or the other; things are not afterward as they were before. Holy Spirit ministry must be like that: it must produce something, it must effect something, it must make a difference. And in fact it does! It does that!

THE FIRE DISCRIMINATING

The fire is cast upon the earth, and, as we go through this book of the Acts, we can see all these things happening: they are happening all the time. The fire is doing it: the fire is finding out, is testing, is discriminating, is relegating. The end of the story is that you have got two realms set apart, and shown for what they are and what they belong to.

There is very much more, of course, that could be said on this matter of spiritual discrimination; the things that belong to the different categories, that essential spiritual difference. But I think we can sum everything up by saying this: that if we are really governed by the Holy Spirit, we shall all belong to one category. That is the point. There will not be so many different categories, or realms, in which we live: there will not be two - there will only be one. The Holy Spirit seeks to secure one category of people, and that is a people wholly governed and led by Himself. And if you have to say: 'I fundamentally disagree with you' on anything, then one of us is not in the Spirit. It is up to us to find out where the wrong is, because the Holy Spirit is not fundamentally of two different minds. He never can be that. To be really in the Spirit means, I repeat, to be of one category, of one kind.

And so the Apostle wrote so much to these churches about this oneness of mind, of heart, of spirit, this 'all speaking the one thing' (I Corinthians 1:10). He said it again, he asked for it again, he was pleading for it (cf. Philippians 1:27, 4:2); therefore it is possible. The solution to all those problems and difficulties is life in the Spirit. And that, of course is based on the Cross, where we find an infinite capacity for letting go to the

Lord. If we forget all the rest, let us remember that.

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