

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who requires the total commitment of our whole life, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Today we hear the harsh words of Jesus. It's not peace he came to bring but division. Wait... What? I thought Jesus was the Prince of Peace and at his birth the angels announced peace on earth and good will to mankind. Was this Jesus just having a bad day or was all that talk about peace and love just so much fake good news? Where is this peace Jesus came to bring about? From today's Gospel it seems he didn't get the memo... These harsh words from the Savior of the world need to be understood from the first century context in which they were spoken. We modern day Christians like to read the Bible and apply every word to our daily lives as if God were speaking directly to us in our modern world. I'm sorry to inform you, interpreting scripture isn't that easy. So, let's take a quick look at the context in which these harsh words were spoken.

The first thing we should all understand is that we in Darke County still live in the remnants of the Christian Era. Almost everyone has heard about Jesus and most people have already made their decision as to which side of the fence they fall. In our local area the vast majority of people call themselves Christian. In first century Palestine that was not the case. In fact, claiming the name of Jesus as your Lord and Savior often landed you in jail. The early Christians were shunned by their family and friends. They were blackballed from their jobs and careers and

they could not purchase food or other necessities of life in the marketplace.

Claiming Jesus as your Lord really did divide families, friends, and communities.

Jesus was addressing the reality on the ground for the early Christians. It's hard for us to imagine the difficult decision those early Christians faced when they began to follow Jesus and yet Christianity continued to grow and spread across the face of the Roman Empire despite the shunning, blackballing, and sometimes outright murder of Christians.

Today when we think about what it means to be a Christian, we think about family gatherings during the holidays or important life passages like Baptism and Confirmation. We think about gathering together as a community of faith. Today, the biggest church attendance days of the year are Christmas and Easter. These are times that bring us together with our family, friends, and community of faith. Except for certain "Cult" churches, I can't think of a single person who was shunned by their family because of their witness to Jesus Christ. Some are shunned because they failed to follow "religious rules," but not because of their confession that Jesus is the Lord of their lives. Maybe Tim Tebow might be able to make a case that he was blackballed from the NFL because of his faith, but I think if he were truly a superstar his team would not have cut him for making a visible sign of the cross during their games. We live in different times and have a

different world view from the very first Christians who very literally risked everything to follow Jesus.

So, if the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings division among family, friends, and in communities, what *does* it mean when we say he's the Prince of Peace and that his birth brings about peace on earth? This passage is a reality check for the disciples. To understand the peace Jesus brings we first have to become aware of our status in life compared to God our Father who created the universe and everything in it, including you and me. **Reality check number one:** God is God and we are one lowly part of His great creation. I say lowly because of the Sin we carry in us, on us, and all around us. Our Sin separates us from God and is equivalent to our waging war against God. This war with God has been ongoing since the great fall. Remember that incident in the Garden of Eden? Since then there has been no peace between humanity and God. So, primarily, the peace Jesus came to bring was peace between mankind and our creator, God Almighty. Jesus completed that mission on the cross and then sealed the deal when God raised him from the dead and gave him the name above all names. When we put our trust in that peace treaty, we are included and have true peace with God.

Over the millennia, we've misconstrued this peace treaty to believe that Jesus came to bring peace between humans. His peace is between mankind and God. Jesus death and resurrection reconciled fallen humanity with our creator.

Because of Jesus, we are freed from our sin, from the sting of death, and from the stranglehold the devil had on our lives. Make no mistake about it, we could never have made peace with God on our own. Sin had separated us so far from God we would have been lost forever, but Jesus changed our situation. Jesus is the Prince of Peace because He brought about the peace we could never have done. The peace of Jesus wipes away our sin and washes us clean with His own blood. We are now at peace with God. Our separation has been bridged and the gap that separated mankind from God has been totally wiped away. Thank you Jesus, our Prince of Peace.

Reality check number two: it's still up to us to work out the peace among our brothers and sisters and our neighbors near and far away. When Jesus spoke these harsh words, he didn't have in mind the kind of divisions we see in our society today. Today the public discourse is volatile, and some say it's at least a partial cause of all the violence we're seeing in our streets, bars, Synagogues, and Churches. The division Jesus referred to was over the commitment his followers would have to him and his way of life, not over political issues like human sexuality, immigration, abortion or any number of other political hot potatoes. Jesus did have a lot to say about these kinds of divisions. In the beatitudes he said blessed are the peacemakers. He told the questioning lawyer the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, strength, and

soul and to love your neighbor as yourself. He said we should pray for our enemies and turn the other cheek when backhanded. He said his followers must love one another and that the world would know we are his by our love. Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, and brought people together into this brand-new thing called the Church. When Jesus returned to His Father in Heaven, he sent another helper, the Holy Spirit to be with us forever. He gave us these and many more teachings and tools to use so we could have peace between our brothers and our sisters. He gave us these tools and as we gather together each week to worship God we're equipped with the tools Jesus left us to go out from here to share the love of God with a broken and hurting world.

Reality Check number three: the coming of the Messiah requires us to make a choice. Do we follow Jesus, taking up our cross, committing our whole lives to following him or do we stay the course and follow the ways of the world? What are you choosing today? Have we watered down Jesus? Have we turned Jesus into some nondescript all around good guy who is almost obligated to send everyone to heaven? The authorities in ancient Palestine thought Jesus was so dangerous, so divisive, they had him put to death. Jesus regarded the coming of the kingdom of God as a time of judgment. His word of judgment was meant to help people take seriously the consequences of their choices -- either for or against God. Our response to the judgments of God has serious repercussions, both for the

present and the future. Jesus says even family loyalties would be challenged on the basis of whether people accepted the kingdom of God or not. The love of God compels us to choose: who will be first in our lives. The law tells us when we place any relationship (or anything else) above God it's a form of idolatry. Jesus' harsh words challenge his disciples to examine who they love first and foremost. A true disciple loves God above all else and is willing to forsake all for Jesus Christ. Jesus insists his disciples give him the loyalty which is only due to God, a loyalty which is higher than spouse, children, grandchildren or anyone or anything else. It's possible family and friends can become our enemies, if the thought of them keeps us from doing what we know God wants us to do. Does the love of Jesus Christ compel you to put God first in all you do?

May these harsh words of Jesus be a reality check for all of us and cause us to reexamine our own commitment to Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God that we live in a time and place where our faith isn't a cause for discrimination or persecution. Instead, may the distractions of this world never deter us from following where our Savior leads. May we pick up the tools Jesus gave us and become peacemakers where our society is in conflict. May the name Christian mean more than just a safe label that demands nothing from us, but once again come to mean we've taken a bold stance to follow the one who made peace with God for us and now asks us to make peace with one another, amen.