

What Time Is It?

Luke 12:49-59

Introduction

Time: Time seems like a fairly basic concept.

- We live by clocks and calendars. We measure years by birthdays and holidays, and days by our appointments. E.g., some of us live in our own time zones; some of you still haven't heard the opening song; I like to close my eyes during the second song and open them at the end, it's like a magic trick.
- Talk to a physicist, you'll learn that time isn't a fixed backdrop but is tied to motion and space itself. According to Einstein's theory of relativity, time is linked to space as part of a four-dimensional fabric called spacetime, and it can bend, stretch, and even move differently depending on speed and gravity.¹ Which is precisely why I don't talk to physicists. Do you guys know who Neal deGrasse Tyson is? He's an insufferably smug astrophysicist who tweets stuff like, "The stars in *The Lion King 2: Simba's Pride* wouldn't look like that based on the seasonal rotation of the savannah sky." Ok, party pooper. It's an animated movie with talking hyenas, *relax*.
- But most of us don't need a science degree to know what it feels like to be *out of time*. There's something about the clock ticking that creates urgency. A deadline. A countdown. A make-or-break moment. That's what Jesus is doing in this passage. He's pulling the alarm. He's saying, "Pay attention. Read the room. Don't miss what's happening right in front of you."

Game Time: For a long time, I really liked watching sports. But as I've gotten older, it's harder and harder to care about millionaires hitting a ball or chasing each other down a court. It's especially tough to pay attention to some of the sports *seasons*.

- Take the NBA, for example—82 games, across nearly 8 months. If I watched even half of one team's games, that would be over 60 hours of basketball in a year. Do you know what I could accomplish in that amount of time? I could write a book. Learn a language. Renovate a bathroom. Or finally clean out my dungeon (I mean, basement).
- And yet, when you do tune in, one thing becomes obvious: a lot of teams play pretty half-heartedly at the beginning. There's a sense that none of it really matters yet. But once that fourth quarter clock hits 2 minutes, everything changes. They lock in. They hustle. Suddenly, the intensity spikes. Why? When the game is on the line, there's no time to lollygag, dribble in circles, or argue about fouls. You either play to win, or you lose.
- The same is true with our faith. The clock is ticking. You're not promised unlimited possessions, and you don't get a do-over. It's time to wake up. It's time to respond.

The time is urgent, and the stakes are eternal; we must recognize Jesus for who he is and respond without delay. **The clock is ticking, don't miss Jesus.**

¹ Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

⁴⁹ “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵² For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. 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.” ⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? ⁵⁷ “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? ⁵⁸ As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. ⁵⁹ I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.”²

1. Time to Divide (vv. 49-53)

⁴⁹ “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵² For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. 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.”³

Truth Divides: Truth actually should have a dividing effect. That’s part of what makes it true.

- Have you heard of grade inflation? It’s the phenomenon where everyone gets good grades, regardless of the quality of their work. Or where students get passed along even though, honestly, they should’ve failed and been held back.
- Now, that might be fine in an elementary art class or middle school P.E. class, where the stakes are low and everyone gets a trophy.
- But you can’t do that in medical school. No one wants a surgeon promoted through their residency out of sympathy. At some point, the standard must hold. You have to separate those who are qualified from those who aren’t. The operating table doesn’t care about

² ⁴⁹ Πῦρ ἤλθον βαλεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, καὶ τί θέλω εἰ ἤδη ἀνήφθη. ⁵⁰ βάπτισμα δὲ ἔχω βαπτισθῆναι, καὶ πῶς συνέχομαι ἕως οὗ τοῦ τελεσθῆ. ⁵¹ δοκεῖτε ὅτι εἰρήνην παρεγενόμην δοῦναι ἐν τῇ γῇ; οὐχί, λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀλλ’ ἡ διαμερισμὸν. ⁵² ἔσονται γὰρ ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν πέντε ἐν ἐνὶ οἴκῳ διαμερισμένοι, τρεῖς ἐπὶ δυσὶν καὶ δύο ἐπὶ τρισίν, ⁵³ διαμερισθήσονται πατὴρ ἐπὶ υἱῷ καὶ υἱὸς ἐπὶ πατρί, μήτηρ ἐπὶ τὴν θυγατέρα καὶ θυγάτηρ ἐπὶ τὴν μητέρα, πενθερὰ ἐπὶ τὴν νύμφην αὐτῆς καὶ νύμφη ἐπὶ τὴν πενθεράν. ⁵⁴ “Ἐλεγεν δὲ καὶ τοῖς ὄχλοις, “Ὅταν ἴδῃτε [τὴν] νεφέλην ἀνατέλλουσαν ἐπὶ δυσμῶν, εὐθέως λέγετε ὅτι Ὁμβροὺς ἔρχεται, καὶ γίνεται οὕτως. ⁵⁵ καὶ ὅταν νότον πνέοντα, λέγετε ὅτι Καύσων ἔσται, καὶ γίνεται. ⁵⁶ ὑποκριταί, τὸ πρόσωπον τῆς γῆς καὶ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ οἴδατε δοκιμάζειν, τὸν καιρὸν δὲ τοῦτον πῶς οὐκ οἴδατε δοκιμάζειν; ⁵⁷ Τί δὲ καὶ ἀφ’ ἑαυτῶν οὐ κρίνετε τὸ δίκαιον; ⁵⁸ ὥς γὰρ ὑπάγεις μετὰ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου σου ἐπ’ ἄρχοντα, ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ δὸς ἐργασίαν ἀπηλλάχθαι ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ, μήποτε κατασύρῃ σε πρὸς τὸν κριτὴν, καὶ ὁ κριτὴς σε παραδώσει τῷ πράκτορι, καὶ ὁ πράκτωρ σε βαλεῖ εἰς φυλακὴν. ⁵⁹ λέγω σοι, οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃς ἐκεῖθεν, ἕως καὶ τὸ ἔσχατον λεπτὸν ἀποδῷς.

³ Cf. Matt 10:34-36. Despite the apparent similarities it is important to note that Lk 12:51 and Matthew 10:34 share only the words “peace” and “earth”, no other words are shared.

your feelings. And in that moment, the difference between true and false, prepared and unprepared, is life or death.

- Jesus is saying the same thing here. Truth divides. It must. Because eternity is at stake.

Fiery Mission: Jesus has a mission that he is eager to complete (how great is my distress until it is accomplished). His death and resurrection are described here as a baptism he will be baptized with. His “own suffering and death [will] pour over him like a flood.”⁴

- John the Baptist says Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11).⁵ When the HS comes on the first disciples, it is pictured as tongues of fire.⁶
- The fiery judgment of God comes through the ministry of Jesus. And just like fire purifies gold, it destroys straw, it refines the faithful, and consumes the false.⁷

Peace, Psych: Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. Wait, I thought Jesus was the Prince of Peace.

- Jesus understood our deep longing for peace, and he truly came to fulfill it. There is no true and lasting peace outside of knowing him.
- But he also didn't pretend peace meant what we often want it to mean. When the crowd expected him to be a unifier in the *worldly* sense, Jesus said: Peace I leave with you; *my* peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid (Jn 14:27)
- He didn't come to bring a peace built on compromise or comfort, but a peace that would come through a bloody cross. Peace with God. **Jesus is a peacemaker, not a peacekeeper. Jesus didn't come to keep the peace, he came to make the peace by defeating sin, crushing death, and reconciling enemies to God.** Peace can only come by crushing every idol that promises a peace it can't deliver.
- The cross is proof that true peace can only be purchased through judgment.
- Imagine a doctor finds cancer on a scan and tells the patient, “Let's not talk about it. I don't want to upset you.” That's not compassion, it's malpractice. The only way to healing is through cutting, chemo, radiation—judgment on what's wrong so the body can be healed. Jesus does the same. He doesn't ignore the cancer of sin; he confronts it, judges it, and destroys it through the cross.

Division: The peace Jesus brings is so perfect, so holy that it divides those who want it from those who don't. His peace naturally separates those who submit from those who resist. In a real sense, his peace is purchased through conflict, and it conflicts with everything false, selfish, and sinful. Jesus' mission brings peace *through* conflict. Because truth always divides before it heals.

- When Jesus comes, his identity, character, and mission force everyone to make a decision—you can't stay neutral.

⁴ ESV Study Bible; Cf. Ps 88:7, Jon 2:3).

⁵ Lk 3:16

⁶ Acts 2:3

⁷ Mal 3:2-3; 1 Cor 3:12-15; Lk 3:17

- Once Jesus arrives, there is no feigning ignorance or playing the middle.⁸

Family Drama: Echoing the prophets,⁹ Jesus shows that his coming forces a decision that may even divide families. People respond differently to the hope he offers. You can't believe in Jesus for someone else, as much as you want to (e.g., kids have free will).

- The gospel critiques before it comforts. Jesus must wound you to heal you (e.g., surgery).
- The gospel is not meant to be accommodated to your beliefs but to confront and transform them.
 - The gospel critiques every culture, political system, and sinful heart, including yours.
 - When you submit to Jesus, you will find yourself increasingly separated from the values of this world.
 - The gospel cannot simply be added to your existing life like an accessory. It reorders everything. The gospel cannot simply be accommodated to your existing preferences.
 - If your job, your dreams, your family, or your comfort stand between you and Jesus, then they cannot stand with him.
- Ask yourself:
 - Do you fit in more with the world or with Jesus?
 - Do you feel more at home with your family of origin or your family of faith?
 - Do your convictions align more with Scripture or with culture?
- The gospel doesn't blend in—it draws a line, and you can't straddle it forever.

Coexist: Jesus isn't just one option among many good options. He's not simply *a* way to live better, but *the* way to life. And the consequences of rejecting him are not simply missing out on temporary benefits, but facing eternal judgment.

- "Those who would reduce Jesus to a sentimental savior of a doting God have not come to terms with the depth of divine passion, of the wrath and love of God which is revealed in Jesus' word, will, and obedience even unto death" (Tiede).
- How can the "Prince of Peace" not bring peace but a sword (Matthean version)? A sword cuts, severs, and separates. The peace of Jesus is founded on the exclusive truth of who he is and what he demands.
 - We don't separate based on sociological factors, but the gospel does divide. It draws a line between those who are in Christ and those who are not.
- Unity cannot be achieved without a foundation. True unity only exists when it is rooted in the gospel—unity around and out of the truth of Jesus.
 - Make sure the only obstacle people encounter is the gospel itself, not our preferences, politics, or pride.
- True unity can only be found in transcendent truth of which Jesus is the cornerstone.

⁸ "from now on" (ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν). "A popular Lucan expression to describe how things change with Jesus' coming" (Bock)

⁹ Mic 7:6

- If Jesus is powerful enough to save, then he is also righteous enough to judge those who reject him.
- If it doesn't matter whether you accept Jesus or not, then his death and resurrection mean nothing. If there were another way to be saved, then the cross was an unnecessary execution of a good man by a cruel world.
 - But if he is the only way, then the cross was the essential plan of a gracious God to rescue sinners at the highest cost.

Judgment: There is no refuge from Jesus, only refuge in him. Either you place your faith in him and he takes your judgment on himself in the supreme act of grace, you place your faith in yourself or something else and receive his judgment to your eternal doom.

So Jesus makes it clear—his coming divides. You can't stay neutral when truth draws a line. But the real tragedy? Many don't even realize a decision has to be made. That's why Jesus shifts from division to discernment. Can you see what God is doing and act accordingly?

2. Time to Discern (vv. 54-56)

⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming.' And so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"¹⁰

Weatherman: I know we like to give the weatherman (I mean, "meteorologist," like you're out here studying meteors), a hard time ("It's the only job where you can be wrong most of the time and keep it"; "You could pay me to guess the wrong answer").¹¹ In reality, modern meteorologists are *remarkably* accurate. Some studies state that 1-day forecasts are 90% accurate, 3-day 75-85%, and 5-day 70%. With all of our Dopplers, satellites, and computer simulations, we are remarkably good at predicting the weather.

- In a less technologically advanced way, the first-century Israelites could also predict the weather. Based on geography and experience, they knew if they saw clouds coming from the west (the direction of the Mediterranean Sea), it likely meant showers. If the wind was blowing from the south (i.e., the desert), it was bringing hot air.
- What good is it to know this information if you are ignorant of what God is doing?
- You can interpret the clouds, but not God's work in the world!

Read the Doppler but Not the Room: Jesus shows how these Pharisees can observe the sky but can't interpret the multitude of signs he has given. They can discern the weather but not Jesus' identity.

¹⁰ Cf. Matt 16:2-3

¹¹ The term *meteorologist* comes from the Greek *meteōros*, meaning "raised in the air," and *-logist*, meaning "one who studies." Originally, *meteors* referred to any atmospheric phenomena, not just falling space rocks (cf. Aristotle's *Meteorologica*).

- “All the indications are that God is at work through Jesus, which the crowds would do well to recognize” (Bock). Jesus is here; things are happening; judgment is coming; respond accordingly.

What About You?: We can discover endless new uses for technology, dissect the latest political opinions, and distinguish a myriad of celebrity scandals, but we often miss the clear direction of God’s hand in our world. We can spend hours watching YouTube, memorizing sports stats, playing video games, and curating our social media, yet we have little time or attention for the things of God. Are you savvy to the things of this world, but oblivious to the things of God?

- Imagine you’re sitting at your kitchen table. The smoke alarm starts blaring. There’s something burning. But instead of getting up, you think, “Let me just finish this Wordle real quick.” That’s the picture Jesus gives here. The signs are going off. The alarm is sounding. And yet we’re distracted—numb to what’s most urgent.

It’s not enough to recognize what God is doing, you have to respond to it. Discernment demands a decision. And that’s exactly where Jesus goes next: settle the matter before it’s too late.

3. Time to Settle (vv. 57-59)

⁵⁷ “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? ⁵⁸ As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. ⁵⁹ I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.”¹²

Metaphor: The metaphor here is fairly straightforward: One man owes another man money. He’s delayed paying it to the point that the lender is now dragging him to court. Jesus says it would be wise, urgent, even, for the borrower to settle that debt before he stands before the judge.

- **Why?** Because the judge isn’t going to cut him a deal. He’s not handing out grace—he’s handing down justice. And the man will stay in prison until every last penny is paid.
- The warning is clear: Don’t wait for the courtroom. Settle now.
- YouTube courtroom clips (the algorithm has me). People standing before a judge (sometimes humble, sometimes defiant). I saw one where a guy was offered a plea deal: a reduced sentence if he admitted guilt and took responsibility. But he refused. He thought he could beat the system, or that the judge would go easy on him. He was wrong. The case went to trial, and he was found guilty; the judge sentenced him to the maximum. You could see the shock, regret, and fear in his face. He had a chance, but he missed it, and now he had to face the full weight of justice.

¹² Cf. Matt 5:25-26; Matthew seems to use the phrase to call us to be peacemakers whereas Luke seems to use it to call us to make peace with God.

Personal Appeal: Now it's a call for personal reflection: "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?"¹³ Reflect on your own life.

- Consider the call of Jesus, the reality of judgment, the situation of our world, and the condition of your own heart.¹⁴

Judgment: Judgment is real, severe, and complete. Jesus says you won't get out until you've paid the very last penny.¹⁵ How do you even pay off a debt when you're in prison?

- In the ancient world, debtors weren't just confined, they were often beaten to pressure their family or friends into paying for them. There was usually no realistic way out. You were stuck. You owed. You suffered.¹⁶

Forgiveness: Forgiveness is freely offered but not without cost. Somebody has to pay the price, or it's not justice. And God is not *very* just, he's *perfectly* just.

- Forgiveness always costs something.
 - If I steal from the store, I have to go back and pay for what I stole, pay the price via the justice system, or the store has absorb the loss.
 - If I lie to you and you forgive me, then you are bearing the pain of the sin on yourself to offer forgiveness.
- It's freely offered but not cheap. Someone has to bear the cost.
- This is the problem of sin that magnifies the gospel and calls us to choose.
 - Either you bear the judgment for your sin, or Jesus bears it for you.
 - The cross proves that God takes sin seriously, but it also proves that he's willing to pay the price to rescue you.

Conclusion

So, how do we respond?

1. It's Time to Respond.

- Jesus is sounding the alarm. The fire has started. The smoke is rising. The warning signs are flashing. Don't silence the alert. Don't assume you'll deal with it later.
- You have a debt you can't pay. But here's the good news: Jesus offers to pay the price.
- Most of us are familiar with the story of the sinking of the Titanic. Of all of the failures of hubris we can learn, another is the lesson of heeding the warning. The first lifeboat launched from the Titanic could hold 40 people, but only 12 were onboard. Why? Many passengers didn't believe the ship was actually sinking. The crew struggled to convince people to get in the boat. Some remained at the bar or in the smoking lounge, thinking they were enjoying their cruise rather than sinking to their doom.
- Don't wait until it is too late.

¹³ For yourselves (ἑαυτῶν)

¹⁴ "Consider the correct judgment, the wise course of action."

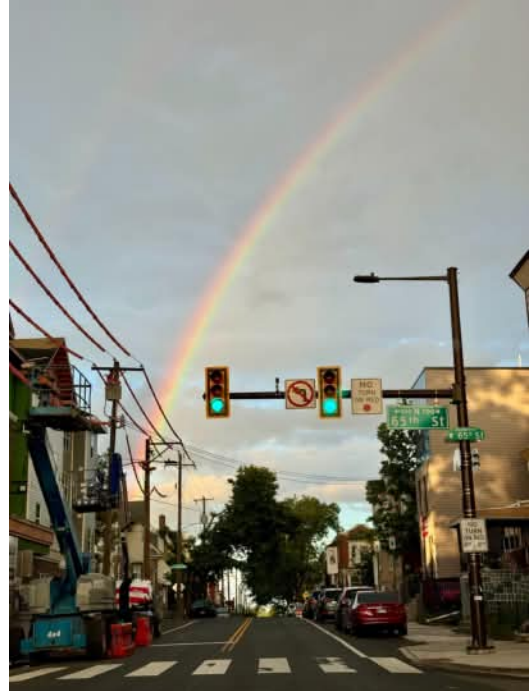
¹⁵ τὸ ἔσχατον λεπτὸν

¹⁶ "In ancient life, the debtor was beaten in prison as incentive to his family and friends to pay the debt" (Wolff). "In fact, generally there was little possibility that one would get out of debtor's prison" (Bock).

- This reality should also change our posture to the last world. They don't have infinite time.

2. It's Time to Live Changed.

- A few weeks ago, we were driving down Lansdowne toward 63rd and we came across a beautiful rainbow.¹⁷ Do you remember why rainbows exist? I'm not talking about the science of the prismatic refraction of light through water vapor, but the story of Noah in Genesis.¹⁸ The sin of the world and the holiness of God demanded the just judgment of God. But in that judgment, there was salvation offered by grace. **So, every time I see a rainbow, I am reminded that I deserve judgment, but God gives mercy.**
- Judgment is real, but so is mercy. And for those of us who have received it, we should live as grace recipients, not grace hoarders.
- When you realize that what you have is a gift, you long for others to receive it too.
- If the judgment of Jesus is real and imminent, what should your life look like now?



¹⁷ May 24, 2025, 7:30 pm, Overbrook, West Philadelphia

¹⁸ Genesis 6-10