

Calling Down Fire

A sermon on Luke 9:51-62 & Galatians 5:1, 13-25 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 June 2019

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Message

The instinct to call down fire on those we perceive as God's enemies is a "fruit of the flesh" that must be supplanted by the fruits of love.

Sermon

"Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

I have a confession to make. On at least one major occasion, I have earned the rebuke that we heard James and John get from Jesus when they asked if they could call down fire from heaven on a town that had rudely rejected Jesus. And the thing that is surprising about that is that the action for which I think Jesus would have rebuked me is an action for which many people in the churches have most congratulated me and held me up as some kind of hero.

It was in 1997, and there was a lot of calling down fire going on at the time. The Baptist Union of Victoria had formed a task force to inquire into the place of homosexual people in our churches, and in particular whether we could ordain a homosexual pastor. No one much had even thought of same-sex marriage back then, but the question of accepting LGBT people in the churches was a hot potato in 1997, and there was much calling down fire from heaven on all sides.

Some were calling down fire on the Baptist Union and its leaders for even asking the question. The Bible was so clear, they said, that there was nothing to talk about and even to ask the question was a sign of dangerous weakness. The inquiry found that many of our churches would gladly call down fire from heaven on homosexual people. More than 30% of our churches reported that they would not even be willing to welcome a homosexual person at the church door. And then there were those who were so outraged by that level of hatred and hostility that they too were willing to call down fire on that unworthy 30%.

I was co-opted onto the task force because I was already known to be an advocate of the full acceptance of LGBT people in the church. Given the climate of opinion at the time, I remain proud of the report we eventually produced. Of course it didn't go nearly as far as I personally would have been willing to go, but that was never a possibility. I hold a dissenting minority view and the report had to be one that would stand a chance of being approved by the delegates of majority of our churches. It went further than I originally thought would be possible and it did get the vote of the overwhelming majority of our churches.

But the point at which my confession comes in was the night of the special assembly that convened to debate and vote on the report. You can be sure that there was no shortage of heated debate that night, and I was in the thick of it. Most of the criticism of the report came from people who wanted the report to condemn all homosexual activity as sinful and to unequivocally rule out any involvement of homosexual people in the life and ministry of our churches. They wanted a report that would call down fire from heaven on any churches who knowingly condoned homosexuality in their membership or leadership. And being the person on the task force whose views were most clearly at the opposite end of the scale, I was the one who was most called on to stand up and defend the more moderate tone of the report.

Now, before I detail my confession, it needs to be said that I was very successful that night. I am known to be a competent debater, but in my personal debating history, that night would certainly go down as my biggest victory. We got an unexpectedly moderate report approved by the Assembly without having to concede a single amendment. It was astonishing, and I remain proud of that. But I'm not proud of what was going on inside of me that night.

I was a fiery young man then, just 33 years old. The same age as Jesus was in our story tonight, and probably around the same age and temperament as many of his friends. James and John were known as the "Sons of Thunder" and as we heard tonight, they were quite keen calling down fire from heaven to consume the heretics.

To be fair to them though, think about it. They had recently witnessed Jesus's transfiguration on the mountaintop, and seen him talking with Elijah. Elijah had slaughtered 450 of his religious rivals, and if our first reading tonight had continued a few more verses, we'd have read the horrifying story of his successor Elisha setting wild bears on group of youngsters whose only "sin" was to yell "Piss off, Baldy!" at him. Forty two kids were killed.

If he did that today, we'd rate it as similar to the Christchurch massacre, and Elisha would be facing life in prison without parole. In a culture that celebrated the zealous violence of Elijah and Elisha as a godly thing, it is easy to see why James and John could think that a little fire from the sky might be in order for a town of dangerous heretical foreigners who refused to welcome the Lord's messiah. I might well have been lumped in with them if I'd been there. I know that in 1997 I was guilty, with them, of calling down fire from heaven to consume those I believed were wrong.

You see, as much as I have been congratulated for my performance that night, I know what was going on inside me that night, and it wasn't nearly so impressive when measured by the standards of Jesus. I was there because I was passionately concerned about the ways that homosexual people were being mistreated in our churches. That was what had been driving me. I was there because I cared, a lot. But during the course of the evening, I lost sight of that. Internally I was morphing into a crusading warrior who could feel for nothing and nobody. I was into the combat zone and the only thing that mattered to me was winning.

At the height of the battle, the issue was all but irrelevant to me. It was no longer about an issue, or about the needs of real people; it was just about winning. Instead of seeing fellow Christians with whom I had a disagreement, I was only seeing enemies who needed to be defeated. These enemies were in my way and I was going to wipe the floor with them. I was not only calling down fire from heaven to consume them, *I was* the fire from heaven come down to consume them. But, as I have come to to understand, when I get into that zone, I can't tell the difference between fire from heaven and fire from hell, and I don't even care, so long as it does my bidding and consumes my enemies.

"Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Shall we call down fire on those who have called down fire upon us? But Jesus turned and rebuked them. And me too.

At the end of the night, a homosexual friend came up and gave me a hug and said thanks, and when she did, I burst into tears. The ugly spell was broken, and the struggle was about

real people again, and I caught a brief glimpse of the darkness in my own soul. I've taken that glimpse to prayer often in the years since, and increasingly I've seen that in the course of that night, I became one with "the enemies". I became just like them. My rage and hostility towards them was no better than their rage and hostility towards me and towards gay and lesbian people. I have heard Jesus rebuke me for my desire to call down fire from heaven and see them consumed, incinerated and utterly destroyed.

It is instructive to reflect on this in light of the reading we heard from Paul's letter to the Galatians. The word "consume" comes up there too. "The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not *consumed* by one another." Love your neighbour, or bite and devour and consume one another? I know which side of that ledger I fell into that night.

But look further at what Paul says. This passage is one of those that is often invoked against homosexuals and others who are accused of sexual sin. "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. ... Live by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ... Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ..."

You can see how that is going to be rich fodder for those who want to condemn anything to do with sex. Indeed, I have preached about sexual morality from this passage myself, albeit probably not a sermon that would have greatly endeared me to the so-called "traditional family values" lobby. But see what else it says. I cut off that list of works of the flesh a bit early.

The list goes on to include "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ... and things like these." And, says Paul, "I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." Ouch! At that Assembly that night, we might have been divided over what constituted fornication, impurity and licentiousness, but we were unwittingly united in our guilt for the bulk of Paul's list: forging enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and things like these.

"By contrast," says Paul, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."

I don't think I need to say a lot more about it than that. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. I'm not renouncing the position I took on the issues back in 1997. And I'm not saying that I shouldn't have opposed the things I opposed or that I shouldn't have given my best to the cause that was at stake. But I am confessing that what I gave was not my best, but something much darker and more dangerous that lurks inside me.

The outcomes that night may have been good, but the ends do not justify the means. I did not love my enemies. I did not pray for and do good for those who attacked me. I did not open myself to the guidance of the Spirit who would have led me in ways of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

We are complex creatures, and the line between good and evil runs right through the middle of our hearts. It is not always easy to discern the truth about ourselves and our actions. But one thing I can tell you that I have learned from that night, and from this story of Jesus, is that whenever you find yourself ready to call down fire from heaven to consume somebody, you have almost certainly crossed the line and parted company with the ways of Jesus.

“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” into “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”