

# Facing Anxiety: Fighting fear with fear

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Now we're going to turn once again in our Bibles to Luke's Gospel.

We're at the beginning of chapter 12, which is on page 1044, if you're using a church Bible. We're going to read the first 12 verses together. And this week and next, we're going to be thinking about facing anxiety. How did Jesus' words help us? Perhaps when we feel anxious, particularly as we look to live the Christian life, but more generally also. So let's hear God's word as we find it here in Luke chapter 12. Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to His disciples, saying, Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear. Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows.

I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God.

And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When you are brought before synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.

[ 2 : 2 2 ] Amen. So we're thinking this morning about fighting fear with fear. I imagine we all know something, maybe much of fear and anxiety. It's a complex issue, isn't it? Sometimes our fears are very irrational, like a fear of spiders. Sometimes fear comes when our imagination runs wild, maybe especially when it gets dark, and maybe our mind goes in all kinds of dark places in line with that.

Fear can sometimes be good. We experience a danger or a threat, and fear kicks in, and it causes us to run, and that can be a good thing. Fear and anxiety can be bad when we find ourselves paralyzed by what might happen in the future. We can face fear that's all about ourselves. We can have fears and worries for others. Our fears and anxieties cover a whole range of subjects from our health or our finance or our career or our relationships. And those fears and anxieties bring out a whole range of different responses. Maybe it causes us to lose sleep. It causes us to be irritable with others.

And of course, Christians are not immune. It's a wonderful comfort that the command repeated most often in the Bible is, do not fear. God knows our hearts are prone to fear and anxiety.

Well, here we are in Luke chapter 12. We're back following Jesus on His journey to Jerusalem. This is a journey which will terminate at the cross before the resurrection. Jesus is walking a path that will lead Him to face rejection from His own people, will lead Him to experience great suffering, and will lead Him to die a shameful, horrific death on a cross. And He is preparing His followers all the time for what it means to follow this kind of Savior, and that we can expect some of that opposition and rejection also. And as He prepares His followers, He's also saying, do not be afraid, do not be anxious.

This week, we're going to focus on Him encouraging us not to be afraid as we think about the fear of man, the fear of others. Next week, it'll be fears associated with money and possessions.

[ 5 : 13 ] Jesus knows, I imagine as we stop and think about it, as we know too, that what we value most, what is most important to us is what controls us. And so Jesus, knowing what is best for us, invites us to fear the Lord, in that sense of honoring Him above all else, to trust Him, that He would have first place and be of highest value.

This week, as I was reading in Luke 12, I was also reminded of a really helpful verse in the book of Proverbs. We didn't actually read this one, but it'll be up on our screen, I think. Proverbs 29 and verse 25, which says, The fear of man lays a snare, or a trap, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.

And as we listen to Jesus' words in Luke 12, we're going to see that Jesus is going to warn us that the fear of man can be a trap that we fall into. And if we fall into that trap, it will draw us away from loyalty and love for our God. But Jesus will also at the same time encourage us that there is a better fear, the fear of the Lord, and that fear brings ultimate safety and security as we come to discover and to rest in God's greatness and glory and His grace.

And so in this text, Jesus is going to invite us to fight the negative fear of man with this better fear, the fear of the Lord, so that you and I, that we might live as faithful followers, that we might even be ready to face opposition for Jesus, knowing that we face opposition with Jesus. So let's begin with the warning that the fear of man is a trap. First, very briefly, to just think together, what do we mean when we talk about the fear of man? Well, it includes many things, but it includes at least this. It includes the fear of what others might think about us, how we are perceived. That can cause fear. The fear of man also includes what people might say to us, or what they might be saying about us, and the fear of man can also include what someone else or a group of people might do to us. And the problem with the fear of man, especially when we think about living as Christians, is that it can cause, that fear in our hearts can cause us to want glory and approval from people rather than from our God. That our focus becomes on the person or the crowd of people who are coming to us negatively, or we worry that we're being perceived negatively, so we can focus all our attention and want our approval from them rather than thinking about wanting approval from the Lord Jesus Christ. The fear of man can flip our perspective so that people become really big in our thinking and God becomes really small. The fear of man is a problem when it's other people who are controlling our responses and our actions rather than our great God. Jesus knows this fear. He knows that the fear of man is a trap. And he knows his followers, and that includes those of us who are Christians today, that as we walk in his footsteps, there will be times and that will place us in scary situations.

We'll think about that a little bit for what that meant for the disciples. And so Jesus wants his followers to be aware the danger of the fear of man. We see it in two particular ways in this text.

[ 9 : 06 ] One side of it is the fear of the opinions of others. So turn with me in your Bibles to verses 1 to 3 of Luke chapter 12, where we are introduced, first of all, to a growing crowd, a crowd of many thousands, a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so they were trampling on one another. And Jesus began to speak to his disciples, saying, be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

So on one hand, the growing crowd, well, that represents growing success. You know, people are coming to listen to Jesus. So there's the opportunity for the good news to be heard, the kingdom of God, to grow and to spread. And what we see in the book of Luke, and then Luke's second book, the book of Acts, that from small beginnings, you know, what the disciples whisper in the ear will be proclaimed from the roofs. The church will go viral in the book of Acts. The good news of Jesus will spread from Jerusalem out and out and out. And so we're seeing indications of growing success here, but this growing crowd also represents a growing threat.

And that leads Jesus to talk about and to warn about the yeast of hypocrisy. First of all, in the lives of the Pharisees, the Pharisees, these religious leaders. So in chapter 11, Jesus pronounces judgment on them because these religious leaders who should be pointing people to Jesus as God's light and God's salvation are hating Jesus, saying that he's doing the devil's work. They call him evil. They're rejecting his truth. They're rejecting his saving grace.

They're turning people away from Jesus. Jesus says, watch out because the people that hate me, they'll turn their attention on you as well. So this growing crowd represents a growing threat as Jesus hears the teaching of the Pharisees. But there's another sense in which this growing crowd represents a threat. It's because the negative influence of the Pharisees' teaching will spread through the population so that many people who listen to Jesus, who seem to welcome him gladly, will at the end of the day cry, crucify him. And so the reality that the disciples are going to experience is not just hatred when they show up in a synagogue, they're going to face hatred and opposition on the streets also. So they are to be on their guard about the yeast of hypocrisy, this two-faced, superficial religion.

But they're also to be on their guard because of the impact that all of this might have on their hearts. When they are confronted with negative opinion and opposition, the yeast of hypocrisy, to be a hypocrisy, to be a hypocrisy, to be two-faced, to put on a mask, the temptation for the follower of Jesus is to do just that, is to put on a mask, to try and blend in to avoid attention, is to give in to the pressure to keep faith private. Perhaps we can think of Peter, follower of Jesus, as Jesus was arrested, and Peter and the disciples were thrown into confusion. We thought he was the one who was going to be our savior. When Peter was asked if he was a friend of Jesus, three times he denied even knowing him. The fear of man is real when it comes to the opinions of others. The other side of the fear of man that Jesus identifies here in verses 4 to 12 is the fear of opposition. This is equally real. One recurring theme in the teaching of Jesus as he's on this journey. This isn't the last time we're going to hear this. He's going to say to his followers, I'm going to suffer, I'm going to be rejected, I'm going to be killed, ultimately I'll rise again. But he wants to prepare his followers to be ready to count the cost themselves, to walk that same road, to be ready to pick up their cross and follow him as they and we might face physical threat and persecution. Look at verse 4,

[13:27] I tell you my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. Or look at verse 11 for a different kind of opposition. When you're brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities do not worry about how you'll defend yourselves or what you'll say.

Public opposition of their beliefs and values called to defend their faith in a hostile atmosphere with the constant threat of death hanging over them. It's there in the book of Acts.

It's there in the stories written throughout church history that followers of Jesus have faced opposition sometimes to the point of death. It's the story of so many of our brothers and sisters around the world today. To identify as a Christian is to be identified as an enemy of the state in some cases to be someone worthy of prison or of death. But it is true to say that for every Christian here, we will face threat and opposition of different kinds if we are living faithfully for him.

And it's also true to say that the fear of man that we experience will differ from person to person. But here is one thing in common. Ed Welch, who's a biblical counselor, has written a couple of really helpful books on this subject. One is called When People Are Big and God Is Small.

The other is Running Scared. But Ed Welch says this, That's what Jesus is warning us about.

[ 15 : 40 ] Now, if, like me, you can identify with this so, so readily, you've known times of deep disappointment because in the crunch moment you didn't stand up for Jesus, you didn't talk to someone about your faith, you regret not saying or doing the right thing. Perhaps you're here today and you feel trapped by this. I would love to live out my faith in public for Jesus, but I feel so afraid. What should we do?

Well, I think the first thing that we need to do is we need to confess. To confess it as sin. Because when we make people bigger than God, what we've done is we've set up an idol in our hearts.

That even though we may not be intending to do it, we are robbing God of glory. And so we need to confess that fear of man as it grips us and paralyzes us. I think it's also helpful for us to have a conversation with ourselves. Why is it that we care so much about the opinions of others that we don't care as much about the opinion of God and the honor of God? Why do we care so much about our own comfort and we don't want to feel awkwardness for the sake of the honor of Jesus? What is it that causes that in my heart? To talk to ourselves and to reflect on that. But what we also crucially need to do is we need to consider how awesome and glorious and wonderful our God is. Because it's only as we let the bigness of God become real to us, only as we let that expose the fear of man in us, that those fears will quiet down and instead will live guided by a greater fear. So that's where we're going next, to think about the encouragement that we have here, that the fear of the Lord brings safety.

Again, to think very briefly, what is the fear of the Lord? They're all through the Bible. Perhaps we can think about it in this way. The fear of the Lord is a response of awe and wonder to the greatness and glory of God and to the grace of God. Responding both to His greatness and His grace.

So there's examples through the Bible of God's people responding to His greatness as they are confronted by the awesome holiness and wonder of God. So Isaiah, the prophet in the Old Testament, Isaiah chapter 6, he has a vision of God's glory there in the temple where just the train of God's robe fills the temple and there's the angels and they're crying, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. And Isaiah's response is to say, woe is me for I am undone. He senses his uncleanness, his people's uncleanness, and he falls on his face as though dead. Another example, John, the apostle John, imprisoned on the island of Patmos for being faithful to Jesus. He is also given a vision. He's given a vision of the glory of the Lord Jesus, and he says that Jesus' face, remember John was Jesus' probably closest friend, but he sees Jesus' face shining like the sun in all its brilliance. And again, we find John the apostle fall at his feet as though dead, confronted by the greatness, the grandeur, the glory of the Lord Jesus. We see it with the disciples also. Maybe we know the time where Jesus and his disciples were in a boat together and Jesus is sleeping. The disciples are not, and a storm quips up, and the disciples are afraid in the storm, and they wake Jesus up, and Jesus rebukes the storm.

[ 19 : 34 ] It stops because he speaks, and the disciples are left with a greater fear. Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him. The glory of God should cause a sense of awe and wonder. Jesus in Luke 12 gives us a number of pointers to God's greatness so that we would fear him, that we would recognize his honor.

So verses 1 to 3, and I think about verses 2 and 3, when Jesus says there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed or hidden, that will not be made known, that is a reminder, we find this in God's word, that all of our lives lie open to God. All of our hearts, all of our thoughts are open to him. It's as if Jesus himself sees the raw, unedited video of our lives. For those of us on social media, we have an edited, a very carefully often edited version of our life that we want to present publicly.

The best version of ourselves, that's what we're going to put up there. Jesus sees it all. Public, private thoughts, words, emotions, the good and the bad. All of our lives lie open to the God who sees and knows everything. He's a great God. Verse 5, Jesus says, I will show you whom you should fear.

Fear him who after your body has been killed has authority to throw you into hell. What is Jesus saying there? He's speaking of God as creator with authority over our body and over our soul, over our life and over our death, over our eternal destiny, heaven or hell. We should fear and honor him.

Verse 6, are not five sparrows sold for two pennies, yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. We should fear this king with complete, intimate knowledge and control over all of his creation. That includes sparrows, that includes us.

[ 22 : 15 ] Verse 8, I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the son of man, will also acknowledge before the angels of God, but whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God. Here is a reminder again that we should fear this God because he is the one who delivers the verdict on our lives on the day of judgment. That's reality we need to reckon with.

And Jesus reminds us that the verdict delivered on us then depends on the verdict we deliver on Jesus in our lives. We should fear our God. We should bow in humility as we behold our God. There is none like him. He is the one who should control us. We fear him and that we would obey him.

Because Jesus reminds us, as God's word reminds us, that God is not small. God is not harmless and insignificant. We can forget him oh so quickly. We can make him small in our imagination, but that does not change the reality that God is bigger than anyone and anything, and he is certainly big enough for us to fear and honor and admire. But the question then is, how can fear ever make us feel safe? Aren't they opposite?

Well, we sang something of that in Psalm 31, but we can go to another place. In the book of Isaiah Isaiah chapter 8, there is a message that comes from God through Isaiah to a fearful people.

And in Isaiah chapter 8, verses 12 to 14, God delivers the message, do not fear your enemies. Instead, it's the Lord Almighty. He is the one you are to fear. And he tells them why.

[ 24 : 33 ] If you fear the Lord, he would be for you a sanctuary. He would be your safe place. He would be your shelter.

Now, we have seen something of storms in the last couple of weeks. Some of you come from countries where you know far more significant storms than storm babette. But we know the difference, I think, between being in the eye of the storm, where we can feel really exposed and we feel battered and we can feel really fearful and helpless. There's a great difference between experiencing the storm that way and experiencing the storm in a safe shelter, the shelter of your home by your fireside.

And what the Bible tells us, what Jesus tells us, is that God is big and he is strong. And that's good news because he is the shelter in any storm that we will face. He is a strong refuge when we face opposition, when people hate us. Indeed, as God's people through history have testified, even if it means giving your life, God is a strong shelter. And so Jesus wants the fear of the Lord to be a source of comfort and assurance for his followers. Just as we find that emphasis through our order of service that we have spoken and sung of the fear of the Lord, so we began in Psalm 34 verse 9, fear the Lord, you his holy people. So there's a command, but it comes with a promise, for those who fear him lack nothing. Psalm 31 verse 19, how abundant are the good things that you've stored up for those who fear you, those who take refuge in you. With a command comes promise.

Proverbs 14, whoever fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for their children it will be a refuge. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death. The fear of the Lord is life. The fear of the Lord is safety. The fear of the Lord is to know good things from God himself. And here in Jesus' words, he can say, verse 5, fear him, and then in verse 7, don't be afraid.

Fear the Lord and don't be afraid. How is that possible? What is Jesus telling us about our God here? He says, fear the Lord and don't be afraid. Verse 6, of the one who doesn't forget even those five sparrows sold for two pennies. Fear and don't be afraid of the one who numbers the hairs on our head and says to us, you're worth more than many sparrows. Don't be afraid when you know God knows you and cares for you personally and intimately. The God who knows when sparrows are sold, the God who knows all those starfish that washed up in Portobello Beach, is the God who knows the number of hairs on our head. He knows us, he knows us, we're worth more than many sparrows. He loves his children. There is security in him.

[ 27 : 59 ] Fear God and do not be afraid because he promises whoever publicly acknowledges me, I will acknowledge before the angels of God. Don't be afraid when Jesus says, I'm not ashamed to call you my brother or my sister.

I'm not ashamed to call you friend. He will never let us down. Fear God and do not be afraid of the God who gives us forgiveness. Verse 10, what a wonderful promise. Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. Think of Peter speaking a word against Jesus because he was afraid. We've done that for all of our sins. There is this promise of forgiveness. Fear God and do not be afraid even when we face opposition. Back to verses 11 and 12, do not worry about how you'll defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.

The God who knows us and cares for us sends the Spirit so we have protection and provision to help us to testify to the gospel, to stand firm, to declare that Jesus is Lord. So Jesus says to us when we fear the Lord, there is not much else to fear. So as we close, let's hear in this text an invitation to fight fear with fear. As we recognize that fears are real, that anxiety is real, and that includes as we walk the journey of faith, as we seek to be obedient to Jesus, how can we grow in this right fear, this fear of the Lord? So that on Monday morning, when our friends or our colleagues are talking about our weekend, that we wouldn't be afraid to talk about the fact that we go to church and what we learn there.

So that as we're going through the week and we're with our non-Christian family, our friends, and there is that opportunity to turn a conversation to matters of faith and to talk about Jesus, that we would take it and not shy away. How can we grow in that right fear so that we will open our mouth even when we tremble with fear? We tremble with fear because we want people to know the goodness of God through Jesus. How can we grow in that right fear? Well, crucial for Jesus in these verses is the question of our perspective. Where is my focus? So think about that. If we often find people are big and we live with the fear of man and God is small. Jesus says to us, here is what you need to focus on. Here is who you need to focus on. Focus more on the awesome wonder of your Father in heaven. Remember who he is and what he's like. He is most powerful. He is most wise. He is most loving. He is the one who knows everything.

He is the one who judges everyone. He is the one who determines our eternal destiny. He is the one who sent his son on this journey to save us. He is the one who sends his spirit to be a present help for us. It is this God who invites us, who calls us, who says, don't live with the fear of man. Don't live crippled and paralyzed. Rather fear me, honor me, show loyalty to me, worship me, and do not be afraid.

[ 31 : 47 ] If we live with the fear of man, if our focus is on others and they control us, what we need to do is also to focus more on how wonderful and awesome Jesus and his gospel is.

And I think that's where the example of Peter is so wonderful. You go back to Peter. When Peter was controlled by the fear of man, that's when he denied knowing Jesus. We find him after Jesus dies on the cross, hiding behind closed doors with the other disciples. But later, as he meets with the risen Lord Jesus, as he understands that Jesus had to go to the cross in order to die to save him, as Jesus sent the spirit to Peter and the followers of Jesus as he promised, we see a remarkable change in Peter as he lives with the Lord. So that Acts chapter 4, we find Peter and John boldly facing arrest as followers of Jesus, going to prison, facing down hostile opposition. And there's a wonderful verse in Acts chapter 4 verse 13, which says, when his opponents, when they saw the courage of Peter and John, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

And do you want to sense that's it? Being with Jesus. That's our antidote to the fear of man.

As we come to rejoice in him, as we love him for who he is and for what he has done, that's what gives us the joy and the motivation to live faithfully and to want to share him with others.

That same Peter would later write to believers facing persecution, the beginnings of persecution from the Roman Empire. And in 1 Peter 1 verses 17 to 19, he would call on disciples to conduct yourselves with holy fear. Live with the fear of the Lord, knowing this, knowing you are ransomed with the precious blood of Christ. That's how we fight fear with fear. As we remember, as we embrace the reality that Jesus, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, became sin for us.

[ 34 : 29 ] Gave his life as that sacrifice to cover our sins, including the fear of man, that he would set us free. Setting us free to live with a better fear, so that we could rejoice and tremble before our God, knowing he's our Father in heaven. Freeing us to live with security, knowing him as our sanctuary and shelter. That's a wonderful truth and reality for all who believe, for all who fear. That's a wonderful invitation to us all. Whoever you are, if you're not a Christian, you're invited today to trust Jesus as Savior. To give him your heart and your loyalty and your love and your worship. To fear him so that you would not need to live with the fear of man. Let's pray together. Lord, our God, we thank you once again for the journey of Jesus. His willingness to leave the glory of heaven to come and live on this earth.

His willingness to deliberately, in accordance with your plan, to go towards Jerusalem and towards the cross so that he might save his people. Knowing that he would rise again to be the king for his people forever. To be the strength of his people. To send the spirit to his people.

Lord, as we recognize so often the fear of man in ourselves, we pray that by your grace and with the help of your spirit, we would look to fight that fear with a better fear. The fear of the Lord.

Lord, as you would keep us mindful of how great you are and how gracious you are.