

Healthy Fear

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- [0 : 00] The reading this morning is from Luke chapter 12 verses 1 to 12. 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.
- [1 : 45] 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. Okay, so in this passage this morning in Luke chapter 12, here we find Jesus shifting his focus.
- We were looking at what he had to say to the Pharisees back in chapter 11 last week. And now he's turning towards his own disciples. And as you might expect, that shift of focus means there's a more positive overall feel this week compared to the woes of the preceding section.
- But we will also find that there are several warnings woven through these verses in amongst the more immediately positive things. One of the commentaries I was reading gives verses 4 to 12 the heading, Be Ready for Judgment.
- [3 : 11] And another gives a similar heading, not just for those few verses, but kind of chapters 12 and 13 as a whole. There's a focus on the future coming in here. As Jesus calls, his disciples calls us to prepare for the day of judgment when all things will be unveiled.
- It's wise to note as we kick off that according to verse 1, a crowd of many thousands has gathered. So yes, Jesus speaks, it says, first to his disciples.
- But he doesn't speak only to his disciples. The crowd are there as well. The reassurances and the warnings, they find a wider audience than just those 12 men 2,000 years ago.
- And I hope and pray that as we consider them together, you'll find these verses profitable to you as well. Three headings this morning, each in the form this time of an instruction as to what we should do ourselves on the basis of these verses.
- First, recognize that God knows. Second, fear the God who cares. And third, trust the God who helps.
- [4 : 19] Recognize that God knows. Fear the God who cares. And trust the God who helps. So let's dive in. Let's recognize that God knows.

We're saying here in verse 1, Jesus sums up the attitude of the Pharisees that he was critiquing so strongly in those preceding verses as hypocrisy.

That was our title last week, woe to the hypocrites. But now he says to his disciples, he says to the crowd, he says to us, he says, be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

The idea of the yeast here is that it's a small thing that affects everything. You put the yeast in your dough and the whole thing swells up and increases.

The yeast works its way throughout the dough. You put some hypocrisy into your heart and the whole thing becomes diseased. So hypocrisy, Jesus warns us, is not just a danger for those people over there, not just for those Pharisees.

[5 : 20] It's not just something for which we condemn our enemies. No. Hypocrisy is a danger for you and for me. We're tempted. We're tempted to model ourselves after those who are themselves hypocrites.

We find ourselves starting down a hypocritical path. We find ourselves putting on a front and pretending that we're better than we are. And before we know it, having started down that path, it becomes more and more difficult to change.

Because we're so wedded to the image of ourselves that we've presented. It feels too late to change. We can't take off the mask now. But, says Jesus, that mask won't last forever.

The pages of fiction are replete with examples of hypocrisy dramatically exposed. And so too are our newspapers. I've lost count of how many public figures over the past months have been condemned as lockdown hypocrites.

Government officials who trumpet the rules on our TV screens and in our Twitter feeds, only to be found breaking the rules themselves the next day. Whatever the wisdom or otherwise of lockdown regulations, I presume we're agreed that it's not right for someone to require of others what they will not do themselves.

[6 : 33] That it's not right to pretend to be following the rules, but then when we think the cameras are off, do whatever we please. And I'm sure the examples that have made it into the public are only a fraction of the true number of hypocrites in our governments, and so on.

But the problem here is that verses 2 and 3 don't seem to be true, do they? It says, It doesn't feel true, does it?

Because people do successfully take their scandals to the grave. Of course they do. Not everything I have said is common knowledge, and it won't be. But then, see, Jesus isn't really talking about the tabloid expose, is he?

His point isn't the court of public opinion, but rather the only court that ultimately matters. It may not be disclosed to others around us, but it's not hidden from God.

There's no such thing as a perfect cover-up. You might think your facade is perfect, and it might fool a lot of people for a long time. But it doesn't fool God for even a single moment.

[7 : 59] Everything you have ever said, he has heard, however secretly it was whispered. Everything you've ever done, he has seen, however carefully you checked for onlookers.

And everything you have ever thought, he knows. Friends, our worst hypocrisy may never be emblazoned on the front page, and it may never be denounced on social media.

But make no mistake, it will be known. It will be made known. Nothing is hidden. In these verses, Jesus uses the image of the yeast that affects this whole lump of dough.

And I'm inclined to think that if he were making that point today, he'd be less likely to talk about yeast that's less familiar. Now we all buy our bread at the supermarket, lockdown, sourdough experiments aside.

I suspect the image that hits closer to home to you and me today is to talk not about yeast, but about cancer. And that we are all too familiar with, aren't we?

[9 : 03] We understand how it grows unchecked. How it affects the whole of our bodies, even if the lump is in a comparatively small out-of-the-way place.

We get on a visceral level that sense of the danger of it, which is absolutely what this warning is supposed to convey. That it is dangerous when hypocrisy grows inside us.

Friends, hypocrisy is dangerous. It is cancerous to our souls. Hypocrisy is subtle. Few of us consciously set out to be hypocrites, I think.

And hypocrisy is close to home. Not just the Pharisees, but a danger for Jesus' own disciples. And a danger for you and me. Now, why is this?

Why are we inclined towards hypocrisy? I think it's at least in part because we fear the wrong things. Verse 4. I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that can do no more.

[10 : 10] 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. Friends, why do we put on a front?

Why do we hide things from one another? Isn't it because we're afraid of what people will think or say? And sometimes with good reason. There are things we do which we are afraid of others knowing about because we know they'd disapprove, that they'd chastise us, and they'd be right in that.

But Jesus says there's something bigger at stake here. There's something more important than the good opinion of your fellow men. More important, the opinion of Jesus Christ.

See, we fear the possibility that people will talk about us behind our backs. Maybe we don't live with a daily fear of death, but we know there are situations where it could happen.

We know there are countries that still implement the death penalty in certain situations, and countries where honour killings, vengeance, and so on, remain a very real part of life. And as believers in the UK today, we live in a world where the possibility of negative consequences for our faith seems to be becoming increasingly likely, as we hear about friendships shattered, and jobs lost, and arrests made, and court cases pursued.

[11 : 30] As Scotland follows an aggressively secular course, there are things we might legitimately fear. But Jesus says we need not do so.

Indeed, we ought not do so. What's the worst they can do? Well, the absolute most extreme is you might die. Other possibilities are perhaps more likely, but Jesus considers the most extreme case, because he says even that is not enough that we should fear.

How much less we need fear imprisonment or ostracism, if even death itself holds no fear. Well, why do we not fear death at the hands of the state, or vigilantes for that matter?

We don't fear it because it is not the worst thing that could happen. It's the worst thing human beings are empowered to do to one another, but it's not the worst thing in the universe.

No far worse than that is to be thrown into hell. So why fear those who can only cause death, when on the other hand God can do not only that, but also cast you into hell?

[12 : 41] No one else has that power. No human authority, nor Satan, despite the depictions of popular media. No one else but God himself. He and he alone has the power and the authority to cast into hell.

And he and he alone is therefore to be feared. Not only the power to do it, but the authority. As the creator of all things, as the one whom we ultimately offend when we sin, he has the right to do as he pleases, to exercise justice.

Perhaps it's helpful to think about a classroom. In a school, perhaps we would think certain behaviour might impress your classmates, right? Might win their approval and acclaim.

But that same behaviour might bring the disapproval of your teachers. And the question is, who are you going to worry about? Will you optimise for the compliments of those who are going to come and pat you on the back?

Or are you going to fear the one who has the authority? The authority to cast you into detention or expulsion for that matter? We're focusing in the wrong place if we're worrying about what our peers think, when we should be worrying about what those in authority over us think, and ultimately, the one who is in authority over all things.

[14 : 07] In 1555, Bishop John Hooper, he was urged to save himself from being burnt at the stake by recanting his faith.

His response? Life is sweet, and death is bitter, but eternal life is more sweet, and eternal death is more bitter.

Focus on the right things. But folks, that's not where this section ends, is it? Jesus does say we should fear God, but he goes on to ask in 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. Don't be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows. Again, Jesus is kind of comparing from the lesser to the greater.

Sparrows are pretty insignificant, even as birds go here, being sold at bargain prices for the poor to eat. But even these insignificant little sparrows don't go unnoticed by God.

[15 : 12] Even they are worthy of his attention. And apart from the most bizarre fringes of modern environmentalist movements, nobody doubts that a human being is of greater value by any standard than a sparrow.

So of course God will pay attention to you. Indeed, he knows every detail of your being, every aspect of your circumstances. See, this same complete knowledge that was kind of a caution a few verses ago, this knowledge is now a source of reassurance.

Folks, nobody knows the number of hairs on my head. Joanna knows me pretty well. She doesn't know that. I don't know myself. Yet God knows. God knows when I sit down and when I rise, he perceives my thoughts from afar.

The God who created you in his own image, the God who knows every detail of your life, he will certainly not forget you, because you are worth far more than many sparrows.

So Jesus' basic intention here is to reassure his friends, not to frighten us. Therefore, having recognised that God knows all things, and being moved to fear the God who cares, we're urged next to trust the God who helps.

[16 : 42] We've alluded already to the possibility of being condemned for our faith, and it's that possibility that Jesus particularly picks up in verse 8 and following. 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. There is a serious warning in these verses, isn't there?

And maybe we think to ourselves, maybe we think, I would never deny Jesus. Anytime somebody asks me if I'm a Christian, of course I say yes. I'm always prepared to give an answer.

Well, if we think that, first let's be honest enough to recognise that that's exactly what the Apostle Peter thought hours before that belief was put to the test and found to be inaccurate.

Perhaps our confidence would be rather less were there consequences to our admission. But even before that kind of grand scale denial or otherwise, it's helpful to recognise that there are countless more subtle ways in which we might deny Jesus.

[17 : 58] Because it isn't only about being publicly known as a Christian. We might deny the unique authority of his teaching, imagining that we know better or we can kind of explain away what he said.

We might deny his divinity, affirming him only as an example, as a good man, a good teacher, a prophet. We might deny the effectiveness of his sacrifice on our behalf.

We might deny that a sacrifice was needed on our behalf. We might deny that he loves us. It's not only an absolute denial of all association with him that constitutes denial of him.

Because of Jesus' unique authority as the only Son of God, then to deny him on any point, however small it might seem, it is to deny him on every point.

Because it is to deny his very nature, to deny the truthfulness of what he says, to deny the essentialness of what he has done. Jesus has unique authority as the only Son of God and he warns us.

[19 : 11] He warns us here, the Son of Man, that's him referring to himself, the Son of Man will not acknowledge those who refuse to acknowledge him. And Jesus will disown those who choose to disown him.

Which brings us through to verse 10. 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.

Now folks, there's a few differences of opinion as to what's going on in this verse. It's not the easiest verse of the Bible to interpret in detail, but I don't think it's quite as complex as sometimes implied.

It helps us to understand what's going on to notice that in Matthew and Mark's Gospels, that this same statement follows almost immediately after the accusation that Jesus was driving out demons according to the power of Satan.

Luke's had a few more things in between these two incidents and statements. That was a few weeks ago now for us, though I hope you can still remember at least some of what we considered then.

[20 : 17] But the closeness of the two incidents in Matthew and Mark helps us to understand what it is that's going on as Jesus said this.

Because that suggests the idea here is that somebody who sees Jesus at work and misunderstands, who speaks a word against the Son of Man, that such a person can be forgiven when they see the truth and repent.

And then by contrast, to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, well, this is to denounce his work. Yes, most likely expressing that outwardly, but crucially, crucially expressing not just a misunderstanding, but expressing an incorrigibly evil heart, calling evil good and good evil.

One commentator says, he says, the rejection of the Son of Man, that is, the rejection of Jesus during his earthly ministry, that rejection can be forgiven.

Whereas the rejection of the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven, as persistent and obdurate opposition to the influence of the Spirit, is opposition to God himself, and rejection of his saving power.

[21 : 34] See, we do well to remember that there are actually things that are impossible for God. Don't worry, I'm not denying that God is omnipotent, but we are still saying, well, it's impossible for God to lie.

It's impossible for him to deny himself, to contradict himself. God has offered one means of salvation, and has said to us, this is the one and only way by which forgiveness of sins may be found.

And he is, by virtue of the fact that he said it, committed to this being true, committed to this thing. It's impossible for him to change his mind.

And therefore, because he has set out this one way, and that must continue to be ever and always the one way, therefore he cannot save the one who refuses to follow the Spirit when the Spirit points to the Saviour.

He cannot forgive the one who says, I will not listen to the Spirit who brings me the message of forgiveness. He cannot save the one who refuses to follow the Spirit when he points to the Saviour.

[22 : 51] Michael Wilcox summarizes it this way. He says, the man who is determined to go to hell will certainly get there. I'm confident that's true, and I'm pretty sure that that's what this verse is saying.

And this is a serious and a solemn warning. That is the warning that we should hear. But I want to also offer a reassurance alongside.

Friends, if you are worried that you've done this, if you are thinking, have I? Have I blasphemed against the Holy Spirit?

If you're thinking that, then I can assure you that you have not. The very fact of your anxiety at having committed this sin is evidence that you haven't. Because if you want God to forgive you, if you're worried that he might not, if you want him to forgive you, you haven't set yourself against forgiveness.

You have not committed this sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And so finally we come to verses 11 and 12.

[24 : 01] When you're 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. Friends, if those preceding few verses have commanded us to trust, these verses provide the reassurance that it's safe to do so.

They offer us confidence as we trust God. We trust in the God who helps. We aren't intended to think of the Holy Spirit primarily as one whom we must be careful not to blaspheme.

More importantly, we think of him as our helper. There's a promise here in these verses for the disciples, a promise for you and for me that even in times of danger, we can be confident in God's help.

We can be confident he will teach us what we must say. Again, friends, do not fear the court that might throw you in prison or even the emperor who might throw you to the lions.

Do not fear them because the Holy Spirit will give you the words at that very time. I need to be honest with you though.

[25 : 13] This isn't quite the reassurance you might be tempted to think it is. It's not quite the promise you might wish it was. Because when the Holy Spirit teaches you what you should say, that may not necessarily be words that will result in your acquittal.

Because that's not your greatest need. Fear not the one who can kill you. No, the promise is that the Spirit will tell you how you can best serve God in this trying situation.

How you can glorify God in the midst of the trial. How you can deny him not in the slightest, even at threat to your life. Friends, the defence that God promises to inspire you with is that through which the gospel will be proclaimed and God's purposes set forward.

That was the experience of many believers in the early church, wasn't it? Think about Stephen's speech recorded in Acts 7, 8. Stephen's speech didn't save him from being stoned.

He still died. But it sure did proclaim the gospel boldly. Or think about Paul, imprisoned for the gospel, facing death and writing to Timothy that nobody stood beside him at his defence.

[26 : 32] And yet that the Lord stood at his side and gave him strength so that the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. That's what Paul rejoices in.

He still believes he's going to die soon. And he did. And yet he rejoices that the gospel was proclaimed and the Gentiles heard. Think about Bishop John Hooper.

Think about countless other martyrs down through the ages. This promise is not that you will be acquitted when on trial for your life. This is not a promise of preservation from death.

It's something better. It's a promise of preservation unto everlasting life. It's a promise that nothing can thwart God's purposes, neither synagogues nor rulers and authorities, neither hate crimes legislation nor overzealous police officers.

Because as you stand defending yourself, the Holy Spirit will teach you what to say to God's everlasting praise and glory.

[27 : 35] Amen. www.sierre.rigtig.Vincius.izanitagop■■■