

Life as a Christian in a Hostile Society

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[0 : 00] We're going to read now in the Gospel of Luke on chapter 12. Luke chapter 12, page 871.

As you know, we've been working our way through the Gospel of Luke. I've been here as the minister for 21 years now, and in all that time, I've preached my way through Mark, Matthew, and John.

And we're almost halfway through now the Gospel of Luke. Luke chapter 12, verses 1 through 12. In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, Beware of the leaven or the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

Nothing that's covered up will not be revealed or hidden that will not be known. Therefore, whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body and after that have nothing more that they can do. And I will warn you whom to fear. Fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.

[1 : 18] Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies, and yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered.

Fear not. You are of more value than many sparrows. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man, will also acknowledge before the angels of God.

But the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. But the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.

Amen. May God bless his word. Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[2 : 30] Amen. According to freely available statistics, over 6,000 Christians were martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ in 2023.

Over 6,000. The majority were martyred at the hands of Islamic extremists. In many countries, like northern Nigeria or Mali, it is highly dangerous to be a Christian.

It's dangerous to be a Christian in the United Kingdom, but our society is no less hostile to the gospel. Many would love to see the complete eradication of Christianity.

Many others are so apathetic about Christianity that the death of the church would arouse no sympathy from them at all.

But I don't need to tell any of you that, because at one stage or another, you've all experienced the hostility of our society toward Christ. It may be a letter in the newspaper belittling our faith.

[3 : 34] It may be a fellow student who repeats Dawkins' favorite famous mantra, Christianity is a virus. Or it may be that a friend on finding out that you're a Christian turns against you, calls you a bigot, and questions your intelligence.

There's a good reason churches today are not as well attended as they were 70 years ago. Back then, it was socially cool to go to church.

Not now. Not now. To live as a Christian may or may not be dangerous today, but back in Jesus' time and for 300 years afterward, it was a death sentence.

When Jesus told his disciples, you must take up your cross and follow me, he was being literal. To be a Christian in a Judeo-Roman world, where both Jews and Romans were deeply hostile to your faith, often resulted in martyrdom.

Except for Judas Iscariot, of the remaining 11 disciples of Jesus who are with him this day, 10 were martyred for their faith in him. Take it as read.

[4 : 49] Although we may not be executed for our faith in Jesus, in this society which is largely hostile to the gospel, we will suffer for being Christians.

We will. If we are servants of the Christ who suffered for us, we can expect that we too will suffer for him. But how as Christians are we to feel about that?

And how are we as Christians to live in a society hostile to the gospel we believe and proclaim? Well, in these verses, in Luke 12, Jesus gives us three encouragements to live faithfully to him.

First, discerning God in verses 1 through 3. Then, depending upon God, verses 4 through 7. And then, defending God, in verses 8 through 12.

Discerning God, depending on God, defending God. First of all, discerning God, verses 1 through 3. Our passage begins with Jesus being followed by a crowd of many thousands.

[5 : 54] He's at the height of his popularity. And yet he knows the time is coming when these thousands will turn against him. And rather than follow him, will cry out, crucify him.

A time is coming where he'll be left alone, that even his disciples will abandon him. But for now, he draws his disciples close, and he says to them, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.

Now, leaven, or yeast, was used in the Old Testament as a symbol for sin, which is why the Jews baked unleavened bread. Beware of the sin of the Pharisees, that sin that spreads through and spoils the whole loaf.

And Jesus calls the sin out for what it is. He says it's hypocrisy. Hypocrisy. In the world of Jesus' day, theatrical plays depended upon one or two actors wearing masks.

So actors were called hypocrites. It wasn't a bad term, because they wore masks to hide their true selves. And Jesus says, see these Pharisees?

[7 : 05] That's who they are. They wear masks. They're hypocrites. On the outside, they look as if they're devoted to God, as we saw last week from Luke 11. But on the inside, Luke 11, 39, they are full of greed and wickedness.

They are different on the inside from what they are. On the outside, they hide their true selves behind a mask of religious devotion. And Jesus says about them, beware.

The word Jesus uses can also be translated as, pay careful attention to. Jesus is warning his true disciples, pay careful attention, both to the Pharisees and to yourselves.

Because all of us have a propensity toward playing the part of faithfulness to God on the outside, while on the inside, we're unfaithful to him.

We must beware of such tendencies, and keep a close watch on ourselves, lest we become like the Pharisees. Jesus then goes on to say, nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be made known.

[8 : 14] Therefore, what you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the rooftops. Jesus here is using verbs with future tenses.

These secret things which are now happening, but one day shall be revealed and openly proclaimed. At present, only God knows what's being said in secret, but a day is coming when the whole world shall know.

Nothing shall stay hidden forever. Jesus here is calling upon his disciples to discern and understand God's sovereign control and his ultimate unmasking of hypocrisy.

He wants them to know what will happen to the Pharisees. The Pharisees are plotting in secret against Jesus. And they, in days to come, will plot in secret against the disciples also.

And the Pharisees may think, nobody knows what we're seeing in secret. But God does. And the day will come when their plotting shall be fully heard.

[9 : 29] The day will come when every word these Pharisees said in secret will be repeated in public for all the world to hear. Jesus here is referring to the day of judgment.

On that day, all the secrets of wicked men shall be fully revealed. No matter they played the part of religious devotion on the outside, their inner greed and wickedness shall be exposed for all to see so that God's judgment of them shall be fully vindicated.

In effect, Jesus is saying this. He's saying, despite what they shall cause you to suffer, they will not ultimately win because God is in sovereign control and he will unmask all hypocrisy in the day of judgment.

In days to come, after Jesus is crucified, the disciples need to know that their enemies, the Jewish authorities will not ultimately win.

Later on, in the days of the early church, when the Romans began their persecution of Christianity, Christians needed to know that the Romans would not ultimately win.

[10 : 46] At that time, the Romans had just begun their practice of emperor worship. Christians who would not bow before the emperor and call him Lord would be immediately executed.

For 300 years, it was this way. For many Christians in other parts of our world today, it is Islamic extremism which is the persecutor.

But as for the Pharisees and as for the Roman Empire, it will be for Islamic extremism also. God will win and his suffering people shall be ultimately vindicated.

How then are we to live in a society? How then are we to be faithful to Christ in a society hostile to the gospel? Well, by understanding and discerning God's sovereign control and his ultimate victory.

We need to have confidence he will unmask the secret plotting of all those who war against Christ and his church. be it secular atheism, be it religious persecution, our God remains on the throne of the universe and he shall not be mocked.

[12 : 06] We're on the winning side. On the 29th of October 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, girls, you heard that name already, didn't you?

he heard his most famous speech at his former school, Harrow. These were very dark days for the British Empire when our forces, apart from the Battle of Britain, had yet to score one significant victory over the Axis.

And he said in this famous speech in Harrow, he said, I can't put his accent on, I'm not going to try. He said, you cannot tell from appearances how things will go, but for everyone, surely this is the lesson.

Listen to these words. Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never. We only have to persevere to conquer.

29th of October 1941. In the face of a hostile society, the Christian church needs to persevere knowing that our Lord has already conquered his enemies and is placing all things under his feet.

[13 : 26] Discerning God. Second, depending upon God, verses 4 through 7, the second, second way in which we must live as Christians in a hostile society, to be a Christian in 1970s Cambodia, as it was for Christians in the early church, was a death sentence.

The murderous regime of the Khmer Rouge killed millions of its own people, including every Christian it could find. The Reverend Peter Lewis, famous Anglican evangelical, wrote the foreword to a remarkable book, which I would advise as many of you to read as possible, called Killing Fields, Living Fields, which tells the story of the Christian church in 1970s Cambodia.

Quite an amazing book. I really do recommend it to you all. In the foreword, he describes how so many Christians were murdered by the Khmer Rouge that it was like hundreds of thousands of sparks falling into the water.

hundreds of thousands of sparks falling into the water. We've all seen sparks fall into water. They're quickly extinguished, never to be seen again. You would never know that any of these sparks had ever existed.

The harrowing picture of rooms filled with human skulls are all that's left of the Holocaust in Cambodia. And yet, Lewis writes, in the midst of it all, God.

[15 : 00] The God who daily bears the pain of a fallen world is at work calling, comforting, rescuing, and saving lives. In 1979, there were only 2,000 Christians left in Cambodia.

Today, there are over 300,000 and the number is rapidly growing. Talking to disciples about all they're going to have to suffer at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman Empire, Jesus says, don't fear those who kill the body and having done that have nothing more they can do.

As I said earlier, out of those the remaining 11 disciples of Jesus, 10 were martyred for their faith. Their enemies killed their bodies, but that's all they could do. They were powerless beyond that.

It is natural to be afraid of death, especially a violent death at the hands of one's enemies, but Jesus says, don't be afraid of them. Don't be intimidated by them. Don't be silenced by them.

Go to your deaths with courage. Now, it's perhaps easy to say these words, but between verses 4 and 7, Jesus gives us three reasons why we're to be confident and depend upon the God who, to use Peter Lewis' words, calls, comforts, rescues, and saves lives even today.

[16 : 26] The first is that in verse 4, Jesus calls his disciples, my friends, my friends. Surely to be a friend of Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who by his cross and resurrection has already defeated death and the devil, before whom all the rulers of the world are as dust in the scales.

Surely that's the greatest of all privileges. I'm his friend. Surely we'd rather be friends of Jesus Christ and suffer for him than to be his enemies and live in luxury now.

Second is in verse 5, for in his second command, having instructed his disciples not to fear those who can only kill the body, Jesus says, I'll warn who you are to fear.

Fear him who, after he is killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. The fear of God, not craven terror, but awestruck reverence which we experience in the presence of his glory.

overwhelms the fear of those who are hostile to us. What can they do other than kill our bodies? Beyond that, nothing.

[17 : 42] But for them, as for us, ultimate judgment from God is coming after death. And on that day, the God who calls his people my friends will cast his enemies into hell.

Jesus here is giving us, as we'll see from future sermons in Luke 12 and 13, an eternal perspective on all we're suffering here and now for him. And he's telling us that the God before whom we bow in awe and reverence today is greater than our enemies can begin to imagine and that rather than feed our enemies we need to pity their eternal destiny while ourselves looking forward to our eternal reward.

The third reason we need to depend upon God is the most tender. Jesus asks in verses six and seven, are not five sparrows sold for two pennies and not one of them is forgotten before God?

Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered? Fear not, you'd have more value than many sparrows. There's that command again, fear not. Jesus uses it in the context of God's complete knowledge of and tender care for his people.

this is our God, the God to whom we are of so much value. These martyred Cambodian Christians, hundreds of thousands of them may have been like sparks flying, falling into water, but to God each one of them was dearly loved.

[19 : 22] He knew each one of them down to the minutest of details and he loved them. With what violence the early church was persecuted by its enemies, but with what tender love and care God knew and loved the early church.

We will never know the names of the martyrs of the early church. They didn't suffer alone, for Christ was with them even as he was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fires of Babylon.

If only we could see how precious we are to God. our sufferings for him would all be worth it. So what's the message here for us if it's not that successfully living as a Christian in a society hostile to God requires us to daily depend upon the God who calls us my friends, the God before whom we bow and who promises us an eternal reward, the God who loves us tenderly and cares for us.

Though the world stays different and though our persecutors may hold a gun to our heads, though we fall like sparks into the water, we shall trust in the Christ who calls, comforts, rescues, and saves us.

A close relationship with Christ, that's the answer. The pursuit of intimacy with him, that's the answer. Listening to him and his word, that's the answer.

[21 : 05] Laying out our needs before him in prayer, that's the answer. Our greatest need is to trust in Jesus. And then thirdly and lastly, discerning God, depending on God, verses 8 through 12, defending God, defending God.

Now, defending God would seem such a strange thing to say. After all, to use C.S. Lewis' analogy, one doesn't defend a roaring lion, one runs from a roaring lion.

And yet in these verses, Jesus is calling his disciples once again to live faithfully as Christians in a society hostile to the gospel. The emphasis here is on speaking out for God, on refusing to be silent, but in courageously testifying to the truth of the gospel, whatever that may cost us.

Notice in these verses, Jesus expects that his disciples and followers will publicly acknowledge him as their Lord. For Jesus' secret discipleship is no discipleship.

To publicly acknowledge Jesus as our Lord will inevitably draw the attention of the enemies of the cross. But is it not better now to acknowledge Jesus as our Lord, even though it may bring upon us temporary suffering, than to deny him now and to be eternally denied by Christ and his holy angels?

[22 : 41] Is it not better that now we should place ourselves into the hands of the Son of Man, even though it should cost us our lives, than to stand with the opponents of Jesus, which will cost us our souls?

This is a binary choice. There's no third option here. with whom will you stand today? Whom before men will you acknowledge as your Lord?

Is it Jesus? It's a binary choice revolving on our private attitude and public acknowledgement of Jesus Christ. The danger is, as Jesus goes on to say in verse 10, that the lifelong continual denial of the word of Jesus will not and cannot be forgiven.

It is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is the unforgivable sin. Are there any here today who are getting God close to committing the unforgivable sin of a lifelong denial of Christ, both in our private attitude to Him and our public acknowledgement of Him?

But then, as we've said, to publicly acknowledge Christ as our Lord, which is what as Christians we must do in this hostile society, is to draw the attention of our enemies.

[24 : 15] The disciples of Jesus are going to learn that only too well. Ten of them are going to die for their faith. As we move into the book of Acts in about 40 years' time, we find them being imprisoned, tortured, and martyred for their faith in Jesus.

They're hauled up before rulers and authorities in religious synagogues and in Roman courtrooms. Such a thought must have terrified these disciples. But Jesus assures them, saying, don't be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, because the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.

The disciples will not have to defend themselves alone. The Holy Spirit will be with them, and He'll give them the courage and the words they should say. Now, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't be prepared to give an answer to all those who ask us for the hope that is within us.

But it does mean that when push comes to shove and we're tongue-tied before this hostile society, the Holy Spirit will give us the words we need.

you'll notice here, Jesus does not promise the release of His disciples. He doesn't promise that the words He gives them will persuade them to let them go.

[25 : 36] All He promises is that when they're called to give an account for their faith in Him, Jesus will give them the Holy Spirit and He'll give them the words they need to say.

But Jesus' point is this, and listen carefully, everyone. to live faithfully as a Christian in our society does not mean in submarine language to lower one's periscope and dive deep beneath the waves.

It does not mean to stop speaking, be silent, and go into sleep mode. It means to keep proclaiming the gospel, whatever the cost may be, and in so doing the Holy Spirit shall be with us.

Now, as we close, I want to do so by contrasting two positions on how to live as a Christian in a society hostile to the gospel.

The first is from my own bitter experience as a pastor of a family which once worshipped with us many years ago.

[26 : 48] As the children grew, the parents began, as most parents do, to encourage their children to get involved in school sports. This is good for you to listen to girls, right? Good for you to listen to.

Listen carefully. Parents began to encourage their kids to get involved in school sports, hockey, rugby, football, whatever. However, these sports took place on a Sunday morning.

The family's attendance at Sunday morning worship became increasingly sporadic before stopping altogether. Their parents could not resist the pressure their children placed upon them to play their sport.

Mom, please, Dad, all my friends are playing. Why can't I? And so they put their children's sport before church. But their parents didn't see that they weren't only denying the church. church. They were denying the Lord Jesus Christ his right. As far as I know, this family no longer attend any church at all.

[27 : 57] The pressure of this secular society caused them to diffuse to publicly acknowledge Jesus before men. They put the world before Jesus.

the second position is taken from church history. A man called Polycarp, a very young man. I don't know how many ages, you girls.

He was converted to the preaching of the apostle John. And he later became bishop of a place of faithful Christian his whole life through.

At the very end of his life, his enemies burned him at the stake. As the flames engulfed him, his enemies called upon him to deny Jesus. Polycarp famously answered, Eighty and six years have I served Jesus and he has done me no wrong.

How then can I blaspheme my king and savior? You threaten me to fire that burns for a season and after a little while is quenched, but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that's prepared for the wicked.

[29 : 12] The brilliant Polycarp, convert of the apostle John, died as a martyr. He put Jesus before the world. Which of these two contrasting positions will you adopt today?

That of putting the world and its pressures before Jesus or that of putting Jesus before the world and its pressures? It's a binary choice.

You can have one or the other, but you can't have both. Our Lord Jesus put us first by dying on the cross to take away our sins, to prepare us a place for him in everlasting life.

Which of these two positions will you adopt today? Shall we then, brothers and sisters in Christ, take up our cross and shall we follow him?

Let us pray. Lord God, we thank you for the example of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, though he's been dead for 1800, 1900 years almost.

[30 : 20] Yet his words speak to us today. eighty and six years have I served him. How then can I blaspheme my Lord and Savior? Oh, Father, we pray for the thousands of people who in our day and generation have deserted the church and put the world before Christ.

Father, we pray that you'd give us such a vision of the glory of Jesus Christ, risen and exalted, such an awareness that to be your friend is greater than to be a friend of the world, such an awareness that feeding you puts everything else in our world into perspective, and such an awareness that your love and care for us means that you will never leave us and never abandon us, that we would never dream of putting anything before Jesus.

And we pray, Lord, for any here today who have been convicted by this message, that perhaps the world's crept up on them and its pressures are making themselves more prevalent than their lives.

Lord, we pray that you would renew the vision of your glory to them and show them that the greatest thing in the whole of life is knowing you. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.