

Proclaiming God's Kingdom

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Date: 28 June 2020

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] The reading today is from Luke chapter 12, verses 1 to 12. In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, Jesus began to say to his disciples first, Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

Nothing is covered up that 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 house roof.

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

Yes, I tell you, fear him. 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 are of more value than many sparrows. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God.

[1 : 12] 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.

Well, morning, everyone. Thanks so much indeed, Philippa, for reading for us. We've prayed already. So let me begin. Today we're picking up on our series of talks in Luke's Gospel from where we left off previously.

As we look at this large section, you remember, of Luke from chapter 10, verse 38, all the way up to chapter 13, verse 20. It's a section in which the central issue is Christian discipleship, what it looks like to follow Jesus.

We've seen so far in this section something of the enormous privileges of following Jesus Christ, of listening to him, of speaking to God as our Heavenly Father, the countless blessings.

[2 : 27] And yet it all comes in the context of opposition and rejection. So rejection, have a look back to chapter 11, verses 15 and 16, as we see those who refuse to believe in Jesus despite the evidence.

Luke tells us, Luke 11, 15. But some of them said he cast out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, while others to test him kept seeking a sign from heaven.

And then there's the opposition which we've seen from the religious and political establishment. Chapter 11, verse 53. As Jesus went from there, the scribes and Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.

Great privileges, wonderful blessings, and yet rejection and opposition. Put those things together, and it accounts for so much of Christian experience.

Yes, the joy. We are members of Jesus' kingdom. We belong to him. And yet the frustration and sadness, as people we know reject Jesus, together with the anxiety and even fear of opposition.

[3 : 47] Now, in many countries of the world, all those things are all too obvious. But I guess we know something of that here in the UK.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means not being part of the cultural mainstream. By some, thought of perhaps as a little bit weird. By others, dangerous, even.

Indeed, if you're with us this morning and you're looking in on the Christian faith, perhaps you were with us last week listening to Jeremy Marshall and you've come back, it may be that actually this is something you are only too acutely aware of.

Perhaps you fear what others might think of you. You worry what it might look like to be publicly Christian, publicly a disciple of Jesus.

Yes, that is a challenge. And it may well be that those actually are the very things which are preventing you from beginning to put your trust in him and following him.

[4 : 52] So then, what is the answer? Well, according to Jesus, the answer is having a strong, vibrant grasp of the future. That leads us to our first point this morning.

You'll see it on the outline if you've got that to hand. Firstly, the perspective that matters. The perspective that matters. Have a look at Luke chapter 12, verse 1.

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 of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

We all hate hypocrisy. The government advisor caught flouting the lockdown rules keeps the media occupied for days. The word hypocrisy that the Lord Jesus uses here in verse 1 to describe the Pharisees, to describe the religious and political establishment, it has a sense that their religion is purely external.

It is a show, a performance, rather like actors on a stage. It's what we saw in the previous chapter, if you remember. It's why Jesus pronounces that series of woes on the Pharisees.

[6 : 14] Their religion is purely external. Just look back to chapter 11, verses 39 and 40. And the Lord said to him, that's to one of the Pharisees, Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.

You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? Their religion is external, looking good on the outside, and yet on the inside, which others cannot see, they are full of greed and wickedness.

And yet they are the establishment, the political and religious establishment. Others would have looked up to them. Well then, who is Jesus saying all this to?

Well notice, firstly, verse 1, as Jesus makes clear, he is addressing his disciples. And the other, verse 1 also makes clear, surrounding Jesus as he is teaching his disciples, there is a crowd of thousands listening to him.

I take it, you see, that whether we regard ourselves this morning as disciples of Jesus, or whether we are simply looking in as an interested observer, I take it that the desire to be well thought of by others, whether it's the establishment, or a peer group, or a friendship group, whatever it is, is enormous.

[7 : 46] And the danger is that in our own way, we can become a hypocrite. In other words, we can be one thing in private, another thing in public.

We can all look the part when we meet together on a Sunday, but are we the same in public during the week? Like the person who told me recently that their boss at work didn't know they were a Christian.

Now, in a sense, I guess it would be much more helpful, wouldn't it, to be listening to this sermon somewhere that was public, rather than perhaps in our own homes, you know, perhaps in Dulwich Park, or perhaps in the lobby of your place at work, or perhaps in the main hall at school, subject, of course, to social distancing and government guidelines.

Are you the same person with friends in the park, with colleagues at work, with contemporaries at school, as you are in private, or with each other at church?

But notice then, verses two and three, there will be a day of great revealing. Verse two, nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.

[9 : 02] 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. What was said out of sight is going to be made known.

What was whispered in private is going to be declared on the rooftops. There will be no hiding. Perhaps you put something on social media that you thought was going to be private, but actually it was public.

Or perhaps you've replied to an email, and you meant to send the email to one individual, but actually by mistake it got sent out to the whole group. Well, on a far greater scale, that is what the Lord Jesus is speaking about here.

He's clearly referring to the final judgment day, just as he is in the rest of our passage. Verse five, I fear him who after he is killed has authority to cast into hell. And verse eight, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the son of man will also acknowledge before the angels of God.

This is the perspective that matters if we are to keep going as disciples of Jesus Christ in a culture which is at best dismissive of Jesus and at worst antagonistic towards Jesus.

[10 : 28] And if we're going to be consistent, if we're going to be the same person with this bunch of people here as we are with this other bunch of people over here, then it is the perspective that we need.

After all, lots of things in life require, don't they? A future perspective. At school, there's the perspective of exams. For the athlete, there's the future perspective of the competition. For the employee, there's the future perspective of the appraisal, the annual review.

Indeed, perhaps one of the difficult things for many of us about lockdown has been that kind of lack of future perspective. You know, when is that holiday going to take place? When will we be back at school?

For many of us, it's very easy to lose our bearings. You know, what day of the week is it? What did happen last week? Everything slightly kind of rolls into one, just as it's easy to lose our bearings spiritually in life generally.

So how vital that we take this to heart. This, says Jesus, is the perspective that really counts. Once we've got that, once we've got that straight, then we are able to deal with what follows next.

[11 : 40] Both fear and also denial. So then let's look at verses four to seven, dealing with fear.

Verse four. I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body and after that have nothing more that they can do.

The word fear comes five times in these verses because, of course, the fear of others. What are they going to say? What will they think? What will they do?

Those kinds of questions, they can, they can have a huge impact on our minds. Perhaps you think of occasions, I know I can, when you've been fearful of what others have, may have thought or might be thinking and you've simply gone along with the crowd or perhaps because you've been fearful of what others might think of you.

You haven't spoken of the Lord Jesus when actually you could have done and you've bottled it. A recent survey conducted amongst evangelical churches asked Christians what single factor most prevented them from speaking about the Lord Jesus.

[12 : 54] For some of them it's that they weren't confident to be able to explain the gospel clearly enough. For others it was that they were anxious about the kind of questions which whoever, you know, friend, colleague might then ask of them and they weren't confident they could answer those questions clearly.

But by far the majority it was fear. What will they think of me? What will they say? Perhaps losing a friend or perhaps the reputational damage that it might cause in the workplace.

So then what is the antidote? Well, notice what the Lord Jesus says. It is to replace that very real fear of other people with the fear of God.

Verse five. But I will warn you who to fear. Fear him who, after he is killed, has authority to cast into hell. yes, I tell you, fear him.

Don't fear those who have no power over you after death. Don't fear, says Jesus, those whose power is so very, very limited.

[14 : 09] Instead, fear the one whose verdict determines our eternal future. fear. I think it's very interesting how the Lord Jesus knows our hearts so well.

He knows that we are always going to fear something or someone, which is why he doesn't say don't fear, because he knows we're always going to fear something or someone. Instead, we are to redirect our fears, and it's a vibrant, clear focus on the future that enables us to overcome this fear of others.

But perhaps you're thinking, hang on a moment, is a fear of God, is that really appropriate? Perhaps some of us feel uncomfortable with the thought of fearing God.

And yet, notice how the Lord Jesus says it is thoroughly appropriate, because it is a fear that entrusts ourselves to God's good care of us.

Verse 6, 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 are of more value than many sparrows.

[15 : 29] Sparrows were the cheapest meat you could buy in the markets. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says on another occasion that you can buy two for a penny, so these ones, five for two pennies, are clearly on special offer.

Likewise, even the hairs on your head are numbered, which will be of more comfort to those with less hair than those with more. How much more valuable, says Jesus, are the sparrows?

How much God is concerned and knows and counts the numbers of hair? That is the measure of how much God values us. So let me ask, let's think about this whole question of value.

Where do you get your sense of value from? It seems to me it's a question that for most of us, I guess, it gets pretty close to the bone. Where is my sense of value?

If my value doesn't come from God, then I'm going to have to get my sense of value from elsewhere, perhaps from my work. If that's the case, then I'm going to keep my head down as a disciple of Jesus at work because I fear the consequences.

[16 : 38] consequences. Or perhaps I get my sense of value from what other people think of me, which again means I'm going to keep my head down because I fear what they think of me or what they might think of me.

I want to fit in. I want to be well regarded by others. But if I know how valuable I am to God, so much more than the sparrows, then I am freed from the approval of others and from looking elsewhere for my sense of value.

I've just finished reading this book called Killing Fields, Living Fields. It was written some time ago. It was written by the father of one of the teachers in our local schools.

It's about the church in Cambodia during the 20th century or most of the 20th century, and it includes the period of terrible persecution under the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979.

It includes this report of a Christian teacher and his family who were arrested. Let me read it to you. Unmistakably, through the tremulous glare of the early afternoon sun, Hayne knew that the youthful, black-clad Khmer Rouge soldiers, now heading across the field, were coming this time for him.

[18 : 06] His throat felt dry, his knees threatened to buckle beneath him. Eventually, they were brought to a place of execution. In panic, one of his young sons bolted into the surrounding forest and disappeared.

At which point, Hayne began calling his son, pleading with him to return. What comparison, my son, he called out, stealing a few more days of life in that forest, a fugitive, wretched and alone, to join your family here momentarily around this grave, but soon around the throne of God, forever free in paradise.

After a few tense minutes, the bushes parted, and the lad, weeping, walked slowly back to his place with the needing family. now we are ready to go, Hayne told the Khmer Rouge.

By this time, there was not a soldier standing there who had the heart to raise his hoe to deliver the death blow on the backs of these noble heads. Ultimately, this had to be done by the Khmer Rouge commune chief.

But few of those watching doubted that as these Christians' bodies toppled silently into the earthen pit which the victims themselves had prepared, their souls soared heavenward to a place prepared by the Lord.

[19 : 38] Do not fear those who kill the body and after that have nothing more that they can do. I wonder if you're a disciple of Jesus Christ who you fear the most.

I wonder if you're thinking about the Christian faith, investigating who you might fear the most. The person at school, the boss at work, the HR department, the bully.

The worst they can do is to sack you or unfriend you. Dealing with fear. Finally, dealing with denial and that is verses 8 to 12.

Have a look at verses 8 and 9. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will acknowledge before the angels of God.

But the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. I wonder how we feel about this idea of acknowledging Jesus before others, before friends, before colleagues, before family even, for some of us.

[20 : 56] I guess we might think that the power of peer pressure and the desire to conform is felt most acutely by the teenagers among us. And yet surely that desire never really goes away.

So then, what is the answer? We'll notice here that once again, verse 8, it is having a clear, vibrant focus on the future.

The promise that the Son of Man would acknowledge before the angels of God in the next world, those who acknowledge him in this world. Now, it's very significant that at this point the Lord Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man, as our youth group discovered when they looked at Daniel chapter 7 a few weeks ago.

The Son of Man, in the book of Daniel, the Son of Man is the one who has been given all authority over all people for all time. In other words, it's his verdict that really counts.

Well, in verse 9, there's a warning to those who deny Jesus. Leon Morris makes the point in his commentary on Luke's gospel that there is more than one way of doing that.

[22 : 10] It may be a denial that we know him or follow him, or it may be that we deny a unique aspect of his teaching or the authority of his teaching, perhaps imagining that on some points we know better than he does, or that something he said can simply be dismissed or explained away in some way.

Or we may deny who he is or may deny his claims or subtly change his teaching to fit in with the so-called progressive values of 21st century written salvation.

But then notice verse 10 is a wonderful promise. Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. I imagine that most of us have failed at some point the challenge to acknowledge Jesus.

I know I have. Perhaps we have even thought to ourselves, have I blown it? But here is the promise, that although we may fail the Lord, there is forgiveness when we turn back to him in repentance and faith.

And yet that in turn is followed by yet another warning. But the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Now to blaspheme against the Spirit is simply to reject his work.

[23 : 34] Do you remember how Jesus' manifesto way back in Luke chapter 4 begins. Luke chapter 4 verse 18 as the Lord Jesus he declares the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

Now if we reject that good news of Jesus, if we reject the forgiveness of sins that Jesus offers, then we are rejecting the Spirit.

And therefore we are blaspheming against him. Now that may be a very real warning to some of us, those of us who are in danger of rejecting Jesus and his message.

But for those of us who have put our trust in Jesus, then we are not to worry, be assured we are not to worry that we may kind of inadvertently have committed this unforgivable sin without quite realising it.

we haven't. Well then verses 11 and 12 finish with another promise. 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.

[25 : 00] Now we see these verses firstly fulfilled in Luke's second volume in the book of Acts as the apostles and as other Christian believers have brought before their synagogue rulers and Roman authorities.

And yet wonderfully it's also been proved time and time again throughout history as Christians have come face to face with situations which they could never have prepared for. John Chrysostom was the Archbishop of Constantinople, now Istanbul in Turkey, and he was put on trial in the fourth century and his trial went something like this.

They said to him, we will lock you in solitary confinement. He replied, Christ is always with me. They said, we will banish you to the furthest corners of the world.

He replied, the whole world belongs to Christ. They said, we will dispossess you of all that you own. He replied, my treasure is in heaven.

They said, we will execute you. He said, my life is eternal. It's a great testimony, isn't it? And yet I imagine it was completely unprepared.

[26 : 16] How did he know what questions he was going to be asked? Well, the future perspective that deals with doubt and with denial, fear and denial.

I take it if we regard ourselves as disciples of Jesus, you and I are meant to take a long, hard look at ourselves. We are to ask the question, where is my focus as I think about my life?

Whose side am I really on? How much in practice does this long, far ahead, future perspective shape my daily life?

Well, for those who are looking on the Christian faith, we said at the start, the fear of others, it may well be something that actually looms very large indeed in our thinking about whether or not to follow Jesus.

And yes, there is a cost to follow him. The New Testament never hides the small print, so to speak. And yet, the cost is as nothing to being acknowledged by Jesus before the angels on the final day.

[27 : 33] Let's have a few moments for reflection and then I'm going to lead us in a prayer. Let's have a few moments of quiet. nothing is covered up that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be made known.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed for this future perspective that the Lord Jesus gives us, this day of revealing, this great and glorious final day.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, for your mercy on us. Please would you help us to have this same perspective that the Lord Jesus tells us to have.

And we pray that as we do so, that you would teach us how to deal with both fear and with denial. Help us, we pray, those of us who are disciples of Jesus, to be publicly, public disciples, ready to acknowledge him in all that we do.

And we ask it in his name. Amen.