

# Worst Fear and Greatest Comfort

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[ 0 : 00 ] If you turn up to Luke 12 that Margaret just read for us and you may have noticed that we have hypocrisy, hell and the unforgivable sin in these short little 12 verses.

We need to get to work. Actually, we come into a new section in Luke in this travel up to Jerusalem and to the cross in chapters 12 to 13.

And the high point in the next two chapters that we're leading to, and this is the place we need to start, is 12.32, which is over there on page 71, where Jesus says these words, Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

This is an explanation from Jesus of why he is doing what he is doing and saying what he is saying. And he's saying that the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God and the life of God that he's come to bring us, comes to us as a gift.

We don't have to grab God and squeeze it out of him as though he's reluctant to give it to us.

Actually, we can't grab God and squeeze it out of him. We don't have any bargaining chips, we don't have anything to manipulate him with.

[ 1 : 14 ] It's his to give and Jesus says, this is why I've come, to seek and to save the lost. To give my life as a ransom. To give the kingdom.

And the lovely thing about this verse is it tells us it's God's good pleasure. He loves to do it. There's nothing tight-fisted, there's nothing stingy about God giving us the kingdom.

It's his good pleasure. And that is exactly the same word that God used at Jesus' baptism.

Remember Jesus came up out of the water and he said, this is my son whom I love.

This is my son, my beloved son. With you I have good pleasure. With you I am well pleased. So God delights in his son.

And he delights to give us the kingdom. Because the kingdom is built on the blood of his son. The kingdom is the place of his delight. The son is the place of his delight.

[ 2 : 18 ] And all of those who come into the Lord Jesus Christ and enter the kingdom are welcomed by him. And that's the source of our freedom and security.

So what happens now in chapters 12 and 13 in this section is that Jesus points out two or three of the key things that keep us out of the kingdom.

That stop us from being saved. That turn us away from God's good pleasure. And the first is hypocrisy. Chapter 12 verse 1.

In fact the whole of the first 12 verses are about hypocrisy. The multitude, thousands, so many thousands of the multitude are gathered around that they trod on one another. Has not happened to me yet.

He began to say to his disciples first, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy. And at this point you can hear all sorts of non-Christians cheering and saying, you see you're all hypocrites you Christians.

[ 3 : 26 ] You say you love God. You say you like Jesus Christ. We're completely unconvinced. Don't expect me to come to church with you. Actually when Bron and I were first married we lived in an apartment block and there was an older couple in the apartment block we got to know a little.

And this was the knockdown argument that he would use with me. Whenever the conversation got anywhere close to Christian things he would say, you Christians are all hypocrites. And I didn't know what to say to that because I had a lot of sympathy with that point of view.

We had an older Christian woman visit us one day and this couple dropped in and he used this line with her. Oh the church is just full of hypocrites. She said, quick as a flash, she said, yes there's always room for one more.

I think that's a great line. I give it to you. However, in Jesus' mind this is a deadly virus that will keep us out of the kingdom.

And did you know, throughout the Bible nobody warns about hypocrisy more than Jesus. And one of the reasons is because it's a peculiar sin for those who are religious.

[ 4 : 39 ] Like you and me. The thing about hypocrisy is the way Jesus speaks about it. It's not just the difference between saying something and doing something.

It's not just a gap. It's not just play acting, wearing a mask and being different on the outside than you are on the inside. Hypocrisy is living a life based on fear.

Fear of what other people think of us. It's being driven not by what pleases God but by what brings the approval of others.

And in the end we get so used to living on the approval of others we begin to think that we can hide from God who we really are. It's the leaven of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees are the religious leaders. They are very highly regarded in the day. And the point is these are men who use God language. They use Bible language. But in their hearts they refuse the word of God.

[ 5 : 42 ] They think repentance is for other people, not for them. Look back at 1147. They're impeccably religious outwardly but in their hearts they have a fundamentally hostile attitude to the word of God.

And it shows how they deal with prophets and those who bring the word of God. Jesus says you build the tombs, you make big financial contributions to the religious campaigns but you want to kill people who come and tell you to repent and change.

That's the attitude. And he says it's like leaven. It's like yeast. You only need a tiny little bit. And it works its way quietly, invisibly, contaminating everything around it.

That's how the opinion of other people works on us. It slowly comes in and then infects every decision we make until we become puppets of the people we admire.

And what is so striking to me about this warning of Jesus here in chapter 12 is it comes at a moment when you think that the disciples have very good reason to be afraid. Just look down at the last two verses of chapter 11.

[ 6 : 54 ] This is a change in strategy in the religious leaders toward Jesus and his followers. Until now they've been inwardly hostile and a bit passive.

But now they begin to be actively hostile. And you see in verse 54, lying in wait to catch him. These are words that are used of hunting and stalking a wild animal that you want to kill.

So it's in the context of opposition and persecution, Jesus warns his disciples about hypocrisy.

And I want to say before we go into how Jesus tells us to deal with it, I think for us hypocrisy works in almost the opposite way than it did for the Pharisees.

We live in a culture where there is great public disapproval of Jesus Christ and his teaching.

Educational institutions and much of the media are driven by an ideology that's hostile to a lot of Jesus.

[ 7 : 59 ] And the temptation for us is not to be outwardly religious, it's the opposite. It's to say my faith is a private thing and a personal belief. What right do I have to impose my beliefs on anyone else?

It's much more strategic long term for me to keep my Christian faith quiet. I don't want to be seen as weird. And you see what hostility and what opposition do to believers is they reveal what we really trust in, what we really love, who our real audience is.

They reveal whether the word of God is more important to us than the word of those around us. And if we are trying to hide who we really are, Jesus wants to tell us right at the start here, that is a completely useless thing to do when it comes to God.

Verses 2 and 3. Nothing's covered up that won't be hidden. Nothing's hidden that won't be known. What you've said in the dark will be heard in the light. What you've whispered in the private rooms will be proclaimed on the rooftops.

Yes, there's a thought. And I don't think Jesus is saying this, you know, God's not waiting to catch you up and then embarrass you in front of everyone. He's just saying we can't hide from him.

[ 9 : 15 ] He made us. He knows us. He hears us. He sees us. It doesn't matter where we are. It doesn't matter what other people think. And I'm kind of glad. And I can't see into your hearts and you can't see into mine, thankfully.

But God does. As we were going through the service this morning, I was thinking about this. The Collect for Purity that we begin the service with where we say, Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be opened, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.

I thought it's a kind of an anti-hypocrisy prayer, isn't it? We all come together. We all recognize we've got secrets and things we shouldn't have said, things we shouldn't have done. And then we confess our sins to God in every service because we're all in the same place here.

The great danger of hypocrisy is the subtleness of it. There's a shift in my heart all the time from wanting the approval of God to wanting the approval of others.

The question keeps going from what does God think of this to what do you think of it or others think of it. What's going to please God? What's going to please others? And the thing about it is, it is a terrible slavery.

[10:34] It makes me do things I don't want to do. It makes me not do things I should do. And in the end we become slaves, controlled by the opinions of other people.

And Jesus said, I have come to preach, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to those who are enslaved.

Well then, how does he free us from this? How does the liberty of Christ undermine hypocrisy? And in the rest of the passage, I want you to see that Jesus gives us two antidotes.

If you look down at the passage for just a moment, at the beginning of verse 4, Jesus says, I tell you. Beginning of verse 8, I tell you.

He's got two things to tell us. Two things to liberate us from slavery. And the first in verses 4 to 7 is the freedom of true fear.

[11:33] Do you notice in those verses, they're full of fear, dominated by this word. Two times Jesus says, fear not. Two times Jesus says, I'll tell you who to fear.

And of course, the issue is not fear itself. It's wrong fear. Fear can be a very good thing, an important thing. It can save your life, part of our make-up.

But I think there's a broad recognition today. There are good fears and bad fears, false fears and right fears. And a whole family of drugs has been dedicated to dealing with both. Behind hypocrisy, in Jesus' view, is fear.

Fear of the disapproval of others. And how does Jesus free us from living in fear of others' approval? He says two things about God in verses 4 to 7.

Firstly, God's approval is way more important than the approval of your friends. There's a simple comparison. He says, God's power, God's approval, they don't just affect you in this life, they determine where you go in the next.

[12:38] Look at verses 4 and 5. These are bracing words, friends. I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body. And after that, have no more they can do.

We want to say, I am afraid of those people who can kill the body. But I will warn you whom to fear. Fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell.

Yes, I tell you, fear him. Now, they're very strong, aren't they, those words? But it's very simple. It's a simple comparison. If you go on a picnic, you're sitting in the warm park, and there's a mother bear running towards you as fast as she can, you're not worried about the ants on the sandwich. But our problem is, we know the bear is coming, but we still build our lives around pleasing the ants. We're so desperate for the approval of others.

It controls what we wear, the kind of words we use, what we think, our finances. Now, very few of us probably will ever face martyrdom for Jesus Christ.

[13:53] Persecution and threats of death are the most extreme form of human disapproval. And while we sit very comfortably in church this morning, there are literally thousands of Christians Christians in this world who've been arrested and who will be killed for no other reason than that they're open about their Christian faith.

But while we may not literally face those who kill the body, Satan has a lot of other strategies which are much more subtle and much more useful for those of us who love comfort, but work out of the same kind of fear.

You see this in the Apostle Peter's life. Remember Apostle Peter? When it came time for Jesus to be arrested, if a Roman legion had turned up with all swords blazing, Peter would have bravely fought to the death and willingly died for Jesus.

But when he was around the fire, needing to hide his faith, all it took was the innuendo of a teenage girl and he denied Jesus three times. And it's the same, I think, with social ostracism.

We desperately don't want to look like the only ones who believe what we believe. We desperately don't want to fall into those categories that people so despise as narrow or intolerant or the worst one now is being an extremist.

[15:16] We don't want to be the odd one out. And so we become slaves of the opinion of others. And Jesus simply says, God's approval is way more important.

The greatest power your friends have over you is nothing compared to God's power. God has the power not just to take our lives but to cast us into hell.

And this is not just a scare tactic from Jesus, if it's not true. And I remember he began verse 4 by calling us my friends. And if you're a real friend, you're going to tell them the truth.

And here is Jesus, the friend of sinners. And in the very same sentence where he's called them friends, he speaks about the reality of hell after death.

And he says, you are right to be fearful of it, more fearful of it than physical death. And I'm very aware of what that sounds like to many people in Vancouver.

[16:15] It's deeply offensive, deeply disrespectful to our human dignity. And as we move through the next couple of chapters, we're going to learn more from Jesus that God the Father takes our decisions with an eternal seriousness.

That if we build our lives on anything other than God and his kingdom, we set a trajectory for ourselves, not just for this life, but for eternity.

We'll come back to this in the next weeks. But Jesus is saying, when you find yourself a hypocrite, what you've done is you've exchanged the approval of God for the approval of friends, but we were created supremely above everything else to live for God.

And if we build our lives on anything other than God and his approval, we become slaves. If we build our life on the opinion and approval of others, we've replaced God and put their approval in the place of God.

And it will not only enslave you, Jesus says, it will lead you to hell. This life and the approval of others, it's temporary. What God thinks is eternal.

[17:33] This is the first thing he wants to say about God under this point. That God's approval is vastly more important than the approval of your friends. But there's a second thing about God that he says, and that is, we already have his approval.

That's the point of verses 6 and 7. 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. Sparrows. Two for one penny. Five for two pennies. I'll throw one in extra.

And that fifth sparrow that's virtually worthless, Jesus says, the life of that little bird is held up before God. God knows that little bird and remembers and cares for it.

And then he says, you are more cared for, you are more precious, you have more value than all the sparrows in the world. That's why Jesus has come. It's the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom.

[18:35] So when we're talking about God's approval and the approval of others, we need to remember we have more than God's approval. We have his delight.

We are precious to him. And that's why this is the path of freedom. If we build our lives on him, we build our lives on an approval that's absolutely secure.

There's nothing I did to gain that approval. That approval has come to me because of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's very secure. And this, I think, is how we're meant to deal with hypocrisy.

We go to the one place of safety, the one place of genuine acceptance, the one place of utter, eternal approval to God himself and his approval.

And we exchange the slavery that we keep falling under of human approval for God's, which is much more important and much more secure, much more eternal and which we have.

[19:31] And when we are tempted to surrender to the approval of others instead of God, Jesus says, remember, try and count the numbers of hair on your head, which is easier for some of us than others.

He's just saying, there's nothing that's going to happen to you that's an accident or luck. The day by day, we're always present to him. And these words are said to us by the Lord Jesus Christ who's

moving towards the cross, who's going to give, who's going to pour out his blood, who takes all the disapproval that we've earned so that we might have God's approval.

So that's the first point. Freedom, the freedom of true fear. Secondly, and more briefly, how do we deal with hypocrisy?

The freedom of transparency, verses 8 to 12. The topic is still hypocrisy, I think. And Jesus again makes the contrast between two courts of opinion, the human court of opinion and the heavenly court.

Let me just read the first couple of verses of this, 8 to 10. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. [ 20 : 49 ] But he 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 he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

It's lovely realism, isn't there, in Jesus' words here. He's not saying that we need to ignore what people think. He's not saying that disciples are little Gnostic islands where we float around on a different plane and don't care.

He's saying we live in real families, in real places of work, in a real city with real people. And the second way that we deal with our hypocrisy is that we openly confess Christ and we are transparent about our faith to others.

I think this is a pivotal way to deal with hypocrisy and a pivotal way to demonstrate our love for our friends. It brings the outside and the inside together.

Jesus is calling us not to be ashamed to let others know that we believe in Christ, that we serve Christ, that we love Christ and that we value his opinion much more than we value theirs. And if we will not, if we do not, if we refuse to confess Christ before others, Jesus says, he will not confess us before the angels.

[ 22 : 10 ] He will not plead for us, he will not advocate for us. If we continuously refuse to identify ourselves with Christ, when we stand before the angels, our choice will become permanent.

Notice please, verses 8 to 10 are not for clergy or preachers only. Verse 8, this is for everyone. And it means using words, speaking verbally, testifying to the reality of Jesus at least.

We have to get past this idea that we preach the gospel with our actions and that's all we should do.

There's a quote that's been doing the rounds the last couple of years.

It's ascribed to St. Francis of Assisi. You might have heard it. It goes like this. Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary. Now apart from the fact that Francis never said that, it's foolish.

If you don't use words, you've not acknowledged Christ, you haven't preached the gospel. At best, our most brilliant actions are ambiguous. And if you don't explain them and if you don't speak about Christ, people might look at you and think you're terrific but they'll have no chance of hearing about why.

[ 23 : 34 ] Jesus expects us to explicitly speak about our faith to others. And I think some of us resist Jesus and we hide our resistance behind the stereotype of the TV evangelist.

I point towards Dan when I say TV evangelist. Could never possibly be identified with that kind of person. They're below me. I think we need to ask ourselves whether our silence is because of our genuine love for our friends or fear of their rejection.

I don't think this is simple or easy. I think for teachers or students in the education system which is ideologically driven, knowing how to acknowledge Christ is a very tricky thing.

The same for those of us in the medical profession and the legal profession. Knowing how and when to be transparent about your Christian faith is difficult.

But here is a principle. You must not be silenced by fear or you'll be back in slavery. And before I finish let me make a comment on verse 10 and the unforgivable sin.

[ 24 : 45 ] We just have a moment on this. You remember back in verse 1 there are two audiences, there are disciples and there's the crowd pressing around. Well verse 10 is written to two different groups, two audiences.

The first are those who speak a word against the Son of Man. They're Christians who occasionally deny Jesus as we all do. Those who follow Christ but let him down. When we fail to confess him when we're given the opportunity or we deny Christ because we're afraid of what other people think of us.

When we realise what we've done Jesus says there is forgiveness and he delights to forgive and to restore and to strengthen us. But there is a second group who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit and these are those who have a settled rejection of the testimony of the Holy Spirit who continue to knowingly refuse his word and they persistently refuse to repent and turn to God.

And I just need to say if you are worried that you've committed the unforgivable sin it's proof that you haven't. You may want to talk to someone afterwards. Come to Jesus Christ.

It's his good pleasure to give you the kingdom. I can't resist this this morning. In the first category those of us who occasionally deny Christ one of the best illustrations of this is Archbishop Thomas Cramner who wrote the Book of Common Prayer the Archbishop of Canterbury.

[ 26 : 12 ] He was arrested and imprisoned for his views under Queen Mary. They had a mock trial first for treason they couldn't they couldn't find him guilty and then for heresy which is a bit of a mock trial.

He rejected the Roman Catholic view of the sacrament. He held that the New Testament teaches that Christ is not physically present in the bread and wine and so they sentenced him to be burned. And while he was in prison there is some evidence that he was tortured frail an old man fearful he signed a series of recantations recanting his Protestant beliefs.

And on the day that he was burnt at the stake they led him out to St Mary's Church in Oxford a little platform built for him there and they gave him a sermon that had been written by one of the bishops that he had to write that he had to read out.

And he knelt down and prayed long and hard in bitter tears and then he stood and he began by reciting the Nicene Creed the creed that we have just said ourselves.

[ 27 : 20 ] And then instead of reading the sermon that had been written for him he recanted his recantation and he said I only signed those things to save my life what a foolish man I was and because my right hand signed what was untrue it shall be the first thing that will be put into the fire.

So they rose up as one and dragged him from the stage by his beard off to the place and you can see it today in Oxford just outside the gates of Balliol College and when the fire was lit you know the story he pushed his right hand into the fire first saying this unworthy right hand and I think it was because he did that most historians believe that the tide was turned and I think that is a wonderful illustration of the freedom of transparency.

as we live between two audiences between God who delights to give us the kingdom and our family and our friends and good people whose approval can unwittingly enslave us and an illustration I might have used before that Arch Hart tells he said when he used to play representative football the people in the grandstands when you did something on the field and they cheered you'd do it again and again and again and if they booed you'd never do that thing and he says in life we have a lot of people in our grandstand who ought not be there we're living to please those people and he says there ought to be only one person in the grandstand and that is God himself and we ought to move all those people whose opinions were frightened of onto the sidelines so that they might be advisors and I'm guessing there's not one of us this morning who shouldn't repent and we need to face our own hypocrisy and acknowledge that we keep putting ourselves in the position of being enslaved to the approval of others and we need to pray that God will help us to exchange that false fear for a true fear to see that his approval is more important than any other and that we have his approval in Jesus Christ and to pray for an increasing transparency to bear witness to the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives and let's do that as we gather together for the Lord's Supper this morning we do so because it is the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom and we know that Jesus was put out so that we could be brought in the Son was made sin so that God might delight in us feed on him on his approval on what he thinks and what he's done in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving Amen Let us kneel as we pray Father we come before you this morning and for some of us it's hard to take our minds from where we are during our weekdays and to bring them before you this morning in church with any semblance of piety and devotion shouldn't be hard when we're in your presence but it seems so difficult some days to rid ourselves of the pressures we face in our lives our jobs our families our social lives things we need to do and as we bow before you this morning help us to make sure that what is in our hearts is not the leaven of hypocrisy which grows and grows inside until our lives become a mockery to you make us certain that what we have in our hearts is that which will grow inside us until our lives become contagious and those around us become infected with the desire to know you more as we speak openly about our faith

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer and as we think of our place in the world we pray for our leaders for the Queen and all who she represents for our Prime Minister and Premier the mayors of our municipalities and cities and all of those who choose to serve you and to serve their communities to make them better places to live in these times of economic uncertainty help us to rely on you as the source for all that we need for the leaders of our church we pray and ask that you would help each to open their hearts to see your will and to rely on the guidance of your Holy Spirit and decisions that they have to make for our upcoming vestry meeting we ask for your guidance for all who attend we pray especially that your presence will be felt and that a new sense of your will and strength will be apparent and may we continue to trust you for guidance and for direction and may we continue to believe when things seem to be going ways in which we are not certain and may we rejoice when we see you blessing in ways that are beyond what we believe and beyond what we can ask or think and may we continue to trust you Lord in the resolution of the legal situation with the diocese help us all to pray and to trust in an outcome that will honor and glorify you

[ 33 : 26 ] Lord in your mercy hear our prayer for those in our church who minister locally we ask your blessing for those who teach Sunday school who are even now instructing our children give them each the ability to reach to the ages of those in their classes for those in Bible study ministries help them each to feel the guidance of your Holy Spirit in the interpretation of scripture give each the strength to continue in the ministry they're in and to feel your call in their lives for Catherine Gwinnett and Campbell River for Sharon Thompson and Burkina Faso for Brian McConaghy and the Ratanak Foundation and for Doug and Anna Maria Graham and Asia bless each as they minister and may they focus on what you are doing through their ministries and rejoice that you're working in people's lives bringing each that they meet closer to you for our pastoral staff we pray for strength to continue in their ministries and for those who support them in prayer and in other ways we thank you

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer for our world we also pray there's so many areas that are in crisis we ask that you would be present there that you would work in the hearts of those who seem unable to stop what they're doing to create disruption for those in our church who are sick we pray especially we think of Paul Rowena Mark of Jonathan of Gail and Ben and Nancy be with each of them in their needs from Iran and his situation we pray for guidance in the immigration board that they may make a favorable decision for our troops in Afghanistan we pray and ask that they would be committed to making Afghanistan and that part of the world a better place for people to live and for those who are bereaved we ask that you would help them in their distress ease the pain and help us to be aware of their continuing needs and to minister to them

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer and finally as the Apostle John wrote this is the confidence that we have in approaching God that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us and if we know that he hears us whatever we ask we know that we have what we asked of him Amen