Luke 12:8-12

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[0:00] Well, we are in Luke chapter 12 and in a time of great anxiety, what we need is to hear the word of Christ. So verses 8 to 12 in chapter 12 begin with Jesus saying, I tell you, Jesus and his disciples are under way more pressure and danger than we are and had much more reason for anxiety.

Since chapter 9, the end of chapter 9, Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem where he's going to be crucified. So every footstep of chapter 9 to 19 is taken in the shadow of the cross and yet even still in chapter 10 he sends out 72 of his followers on a mission. At the end of chapter 11 there is a change in strategy by the religious leaders. Their dislike, their dismissal of Jesus shifts and in the very last verse of chapter 11 they go into a hostile hunt. The word that's used there is the language of hunting down a wild animal to kill it. So Jesus' life from now on is in danger.
And then as chapter 12 opens, chapter 12 verse 1, it's an ominous and threatening tone. So vast is the crowd wanting to hear Jesus and wanting Jesus to do things for them.
They are literally, we read in verse 1, trampling each other. Now I've been in very big crowds and when a crowd moves or when something happens in one part of the crowd quickly, it can be very scary.
And Jesus is so popular that tens of thousands are crowding around him. He's got the disciples at the centre with him. They're in danger of being physically trampled and out on the edge of the crowd of the Pharisees hunting Jesus and who would love nothing better to see him killed.
[1:57] And what's worse is that in verse 11, Jesus is about to warn his disciples that they are going to be persecuted as well for no other reason than being his disciples and loving him and trusting him and confessing him. And what they needed then and what we need today is the word of Christ to hear him say, I tell you. As though Jesus is saying, you're not going to hear the voice of God unless you listen to me. And as we do, all our preoccupations and concerns and questions and fears become overwhelmed by what is eternally important. That's what happens when we hear the word of Christ.

So the whole of Luke 12 is Jesus teaching. And I've wanted to slow down. It's so rich. In the past, it's so easy to race through the gospels. But as we slow down in this amazing chapter, we see without any emotionalism, without any manipulation, Jesus lays bare what's going on for us, what's really going on for us, and what's going on in heaven and the connection between the two. And Jesus warns us of twin dangers here, not to be fooled by popularity with the crowd and not to fear the rejection of those in charge. They are both as dangerous as each other, popularity and persecution. Both can steal us away from Christ. Because both are based on the same thing. And it is our love of the approval of others. Both rejection by others and popularity with the crowd show the power of the horizontal audience, the opinion, the approval and the admiration of others.
That's why Jesus mentions hypocrisy in verse one. Hypocrisy is just to sacrifice the truth of who you are for your appearances to others, more concerned about what others think than about what you really believe.
And in persecution, the temptation is always to present to be to pretend to be someone you're not really, to hide what you really believe. And Jesus says in verse two, you can't hide it, let your light shine. Now we all care about what other people think of us. It's a basic human longing to be accepted and desired. And it's not wrong in itself. But it's so easy to quickly become addicted to approval and controlled by the approval of other people. You know, and to start to believe I'm only really of value and worth if I have the respect of a certain person or a certain group. And then gradually we become controlled and manipulated by popularity or by rejection. And the voice and the opinion of those around us replaces the voice of God.

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Jesus says in Luke 12 that the kingdom of God turns that upside down. Because in the kingdom of God, we don't have to work for approval, but we work from the approval of our heavenly father. And the pinnacle verse in the chapter, if you just look down, is at Luke 12, verse 32, where Jesus says, fear not little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.
[5:36] There's nothing we can do to gain God the father's approval. He's already given it to us overwhelmingly. The approval is given. It's not something that comes to us by our hard working.

It is the father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. They're exactly the same words that God the father spoke at Jesus' baptism. This is my son in whom I have good pleasure, chapter 3.
In other words, God doesn't give us his kingdom sparingly or stingily. He's just overjoyed to do it. He's as delighted to do it as he is in his son, which means God takes pleasure in giving us his full approval.
The same approval that he gave to Jesus is ours because Jesus includes us in his approval. What happens is popularity and rejection cloud our eyes from seeing God's approval.
It takes our eyes off God's approval and subtly shifts them to human approval that easily leads to hypocrisy. And you know that's beginning to happen when you become frightened of the disapproval of others.
[6:50] There's nothing wrong with being frightened. It's in itself fear. It's a gift of God for our protection. But the question is, which should we respect and fear more?

The opinion of our friends or God's opinion? There's stunningly clear and caring verse. Verse 4, Jesus says, I tell you, my friends, I tell you again, do not fear those who kill the body and after that have nothing more that they can do.
I'll warn you whom to fear. Fear him after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. When is the crowd threatens to crush him and crush them and the authorities around are hunting to kill him?
Jesus says, don't fear the ones who can kill the body. Their power is temporary and human, but fear God, who has power over life and death and who has already given us his eternal approval in me.
I mean, it's amazing stuff. He's not saying don't be afraid, don't fear, but he says we should attach our fear and our love and our sense of self, not to those whose esteem is elastic, it comes and goes and is unpredictable, but to our heavenly father who delights in us, giving us his life and his love.
[8:13] So as we come to these verses 8 to 12, what Jesus is doing is he is taking the gift of God's kingdom and the approval, the eternal approval of the father, and he applies it to different areas of our lives.

He continues to bring heaven and earth together, the vertical and the horizontal, so that we might live in an anxious time with our eyes on God's kingdom and God's king, particularly in the face of persecution.
And there are two points that he makes. First, the heavenly audience, and secondly, heavenly help.
Point number one, verses 8 and 9, I've called the heavenly audience.
And the main point of these verses is quite simple. And then in the next two, three verses, 10 to 12, he shows how it works in practice. The main point is just this, that Jesus expects all who are his disciples to confess him to others.
That's it. The word acknowledge, to acknowledge me before others, acknowledge doesn't mean a nod of the head or something you do in the privacy of your heart. It has to do with what you say with your lips.
[9:24] In verse 10, speaking a word. Or verse 12, what you should say. Confessing with our lips what is true in our hearts. To confess Jesus is not blasting people on every channel.

It's not ranting about being a disciple. But when you're under pressure and when there's antagonism, confessing with your lips that Jesus Christ is Lord and your saviour.
He's not talking here about living a good life, which is true. We should. Our lives are meant to show out the gospel. What that means is on Monday, tomorrow, today, we are to speak evil of no one. We're to avoid quarrelling. We're to show perfect courtesy to all. We're to obey all in authority. We're to be ready for every good work, which should make plenty of people take notice.
But that's not what he's talking about here. Verse 8, Everyone who confesses me before men, the Son of Man will confess before the angels of God.
[10:34] The one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. Notice he's not saying, he's not wanting us to speak a general word.

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Oh, yes, I am religious. I am very spiritual. I like church. Jesus wants us to confess him. Until now, all the verses, Jesus has been speaking about God.
Now he says, everyone who confesses me. He puts himself at the centre without blinking an eye. He's expecting us to talk about him, and not just clergy and paid ministers.
Everyone, he says. Thinking about this, I think it's a bit sad. That Jesus even has to say this to us. I mean, it's not as though Jesus is one to be ashamed of.
I mean, the one thing that we should be most unashamed to talk about is Jesus. But he knows the power of disapproval and our love of approval.
[11:39] He knows the pressure of popularity and rejection. And so he wonderfully reveals that there really are two audiences, one here on earth and one in heaven. And we have to decide which is more important and where we should look for approval.

If we confess him to others, he confesses us in heaven. If we deny him to others, he denies us in heaven. Notice again, Jesus is not saying just totally ignore what everyone thinks.
They don't matter. He's not saying that. He knows we live in real families. He knows that confessing him is complicated. He knows how susceptible we are to human approval. This week, I came across the story of a young man who had just gained his sobriety from a substance addiction.
And very quickly, when he got himself clean, he discovered that he had ways of thinking and acting, which fed that primary substance addiction. And he says in this story, I was addicted to the approval of others.
But he says, once you're hooked, you can never get enough. And you find criticism crushing and shaming. And the best way to numb that pain is to please others again.
[12:57] Now, some addictions are more destructive than others. And some addictions are more socially acceptable. You know, the addiction to busyness or the addiction to workaholism. But the addiction to approval lays us open to manipulation and control of others and makes you an easy target for guilt and shame and self-pity.

And the young man said, I mentioned said something I thought was very profound. He said, being an approval junkie gives other people access to your identity. You give over who you are into the hands of others.
And it's exhausting and temporary and fickle. And it will silence us when it comes time to confess Jesus. That's why Jesus talks about the audience in heaven.
He's not just making a simple comparison between the audience here and the audience there, which one's more important. It's different than that. The difference is this, that this audience, the horizontal audience, if you will, wants to control and change your identity.
But the audience in heaven is the place of approval, which gives us our true identity. So when it comes to the crunch, what undermines cowardice is revealing who we really are.
[14:19] Someone who is eternally secure in Jesus Christ. And the truth is that Jesus is proud to call us his brothers and sisters. This is what it means to confess us before the angels.

Later on in the New Testament, we hear something of what he's going to say to the audience of heaven. He's going to say, look at us, me and the brothers and sisters God has given me.
They're mine. They are my brothers and sisters. And then we know from the Old Testament, God, the father breaks into singing, rejoicing over us with gladness, quieting us with his love, exalting over us with loud singing.
This is the audience of heaven. And then secondly, in verses nine to 11, Jesus becomes very practical to show us how this difference works.
Now, I've called the second point heavenly help, but at first sight, verse 10 seems confusing, doesn't it? Just look down at verse 10.
[15:23] Everyone who speaks a word against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven, but the one who blaspheme, sorry, 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.

That seems doubly confusing. How can one sin be forgiven and not another? What on earth is the difference between speaking against Jesus and the Holy Spirit?
That's the first confusion. And the second confusion is this. If Jesus expects us to confess him before others, why does he make it so easy for us to deny him by promising that he's going to forgive us when we do?

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Surely Jesus would be better served to be stricter and give us a lot more warnings here. I think the best help is verse 11, where Jesus spells out the context.
He says, He's not talking about standing around at the barbecue chatting or the Zoom barbecue.
[16:34] This is a situation of great hostility and danger, which we do not face in Canada. But these disciples did. And so many followers of Jesus have throughout the centuries.

And so many believers throughout the world today continue to face. When you may be facing punishment for your faith in Jesus Christ, and even your very life may be threatened.
And when there is such pressure to deny the Lord, there are some real believers who, under that extreme pressure, do falter and do deny Jesus.
But later on, they take that denial back, they repent, and then they confess Jesus again. The Apostle Peter was a great example. Remember? He felt so confident in himself before the trial of Jesus.
But then standing outside in the courtyard around the fire when Jesus was being beaten and tried inside. All it took was a couple of comments from a servant made, and he denied Jesus.
[17:40] He denied Jesus because of the fear of disapproval and the consequences. And when he heard the rooster crow three times, he ran out and wept bitter tears of repentance.

But we know from the end of John's Gospel, he was forgiven and restored by Jesus on the beach.
Or take the founder of the Anglican Church, Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cramner.
If you've got children listening to this, this is a parental guidance recommended illustration. Cramner was not a physically robust man. He was an academic and an intellectual.
And he was arrested and tried and tortured for his view of salvation and the sacraments. During that time, he was forced to watch the burning at the stake of two of his closest friends, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley.
And under that extreme pressure, he signed a number of recantations, but he was still sentenced to be burned at the stake himself. And on the day he was burned at the stake, they led him to the Church of St Mary's in Oxford to read a sermon that had been written for him.
[18:54] And when he began to speak, he quoted the Nicene Creed, and instead of reading the sermon written for him, he took back his recantation.

He said, I only said those things to save my life. But because my right hand signed what was untrue, it shall be the first thing to burn. And they dragged him from the pulpit by his beard, and they chained him to the stake outside Arrial College.
And when the fire was lit, he thrust his hand into the fire first, saying, this unworthy hand, this unworthy hand. Here is the assurance Jesus gives.
There is forgiveness offered to those who falter under terrible pressure. Words of amazing comfort and grace. Though you have denied Jesus, and some of us have denied him even without this pressure, but he welcomes us back with open arms, with free forgiveness and the hope of glory.
But the second half of verse 10 is about what happens when people give a very different response under persecution. Because when the pressure is on, particularly in persecution, there are some who simply change sides and remain there and join in the persecution against Christians permanently.
[20:21] They not only deny the faith they once held, but they continue without regret to oppose the gospel. So in the original, the word blaspheme is in a different tense in verse 10.

It gives the sense of something complete and total. It's the ongoing fixed abandonment of Christ in Christianity. Blaspheming the Holy Spirit here is a permanent refusal of the Holy Spirit, whose main work is to shine the spotlight on Jesus.
This will not be forgiven because the person in this situation never turns to Christ or asks for forgiveness. It's such a practical lesson from Jesus.
And it's given encouragement and courage to Christians throughout the centuries. But there's even more than practical advice in verses 11 and 12.
Because Jesus now speaks about the real and personal work of God, the Holy Spirit, directed to our anxiety, personally empowering us to confess Christ.
[21:27] What Jesus does is brings the approval of God to bear in the most direct and pressing way, right into circumstances that are completely outside our control. Let me read verse 11 and 12.

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

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that very hour what you ought to say.
This is very immediate. The Holy Spirit gives power and words in that very hour. It's not that you'll have some pre-prepared text or you'll carry it off brilliantly because your gifts of persuasion and you'll live happily ever after.
That's not what happens. Many have moved through this into martyrdom after giving bold and moving testimony to the glory of Jesus Christ because the Holy Spirit fills them in that very hour in what to say and how to say it.
And Luke's gospel, as you know, is full of the Holy Spirit. And since Jesus has ascended to God the Father, the Holy Spirit continues the mission of Jesus in this world through his people as they confess Jesus.
[22:48] And throughout the book of Luke and the book of Acts, which Luke wrote as well, again and again we read this phrase, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and, filled with the Holy Spirit and did something.

John the Baptist will be filled with the Holy Spirit and will turn many to the Lord. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and names a blessing on Mary. Mary is filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesies.
At Pentecost, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in many tongues. In front of the hostile court in Acts 4, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.
When the early believers and apostles face antagonism and hostility, they don't rely on their own cleverness or brilliance of speech.
They don't rely on their own strength. They rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. In their witness, in their testimony, the Holy Spirit is active, challenging the world with the truth about Jesus.
[24:00] And this is the heavenly help Jesus is speaking about here. And it's something that all believers experience for one degree or another.

Jesus is not saying, you have to confess me or else I won't love you. Jesus is saying, the Father delights to give you the kingdom. I'm going to Jerusalem to give my life to save you.
And then I'll give you the Holy Spirit who will enable you to know who you are, to confess me and testify about me to others. And I think during COVID, our opportunities to confess Christ are far less.
I mean, most of our communication with each other is restricted by the various media we use. Although in our bubbles, of course, we're intensely connected. But the truth of what Jesus is saying is God's word to us today.
And it puts before us two choices that we have to make each day. The first is, where do I look for approval? Each day I've got to choose, do I look to heaven for my approval or to others?
[25:10] Do I look to God who delights in giving me his kingdom or to those who stand under the care and might of God anyway? And the second question is, where is my trust directed?

Each day I've got to choose, do I look for strength and courage in myself? Do I try and work it up in myself? Or do I trust the Holy Spirit? Have I learned to rely on him?
Relying on him and receiving the approval of God is how we seek first the kingdom, which God delights to give us in his son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
Amen. Amen.

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