

Luke 11:53 - 12:3

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[0:00] Well, I want to echo David's welcome to you this morning. I'm so glad you can join us. And we're beginning a new sermon series. It's on Luke chapter 12. And it's a very different sort of series from what we've been having.

Instead of going through up to three chapters at one time, we're often going to go just through three verses. I think I have the longest reading of five verses. And we're going to be going through these 10 sermons in this chapter of Luke because Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem.

He has set his face to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world and rise again for our peace with God. And in this journey, he is teaching his disciples and us and the crowds how to live for him in an in-between time.

Last week, of course, we celebrated Jesus' resurrection from the dead and a really joyful service.

And it was great to hear the joy of those people around the world saying Christ is risen indeed.

And what that means is that in Jesus, God has invaded the world with eternal life by the forgiveness of sins now. He is king over all things.

[1:17] And the kingdom is growing in this hurting and dark world. It's the defining event in the history of all the world. But secondly, Jesus' resurrection also means that he will one day come again to end history, to judge the world, to make all things right, and to be known universally as king of king and lord of lords.

Jesus and his coming defines our world and all of history, but that is something that is ignored and unseen by the world. In fact, many oppose God and his kingdom as many of us experience.

So the question is, how do we live faithfully in this context under Jesus' rule as we wait for him to come as our judge? Well, how do we do that, especially in a crisis?

And he tells us all throughout chapter 12 that it is critical for us to orient our lives completely around him. We're going to see how love for him casts out fear, all the fears we might experience in this world.

Our identity is secure in him. Our purpose for our life is clear in him as well. It is a chapter that's filled with hope, but also searching challenge as it gives direction for the whole of our life.

[2:50] So it's exciting to be part of this chapter. And our passage today has to do with our hearts, which is the inner life that no one sees of the things that are most important to us inside of us.

So let's turn to Luke chapter 11, 53 through 12, 3. These verses are a lot about our heart. They're like a heart checkup.

We check our physical hearts all the time. Our blood pressure is frequently checked if we go to the doctor. We monitor our heart rates with our phones or with our watches, especially when we exercise.

We exercise for strong hearts. We look for signs of heart attacks and any problems. Well, Jesus is examining our hearts within us. He does this all throughout the Gospel of Luke.

Right at the beginning, when Jesus was a little baby, Simeon blessed Jesus and his family. And he said to Mary, his mother, Behold, this little child is appointed for the fall and the rising of many in Jerusalem for a sign that is opposed so that thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

[4:08] And that's what happens today. The reason Jesus reveals hearts is to heal them. And my question for you as you're watching this now is, where is your heart this morning?

You know, you may have joined this morning because you're searching for God and you want to know more. You might be new with us. God's purpose for you is for your heart to become a new creation that is alive to God.

You may have come to St. John's for a long time and you are honestly not sure where my heart is towards God today. Well, Jesus' work, the work of his Gospel, is to change you.

His good news means that the Holy Spirit transforms hardened and blocked arteries of our spiritual hearts so that they beat for him, so that they love him.

This is the healing work that each of us need to have happen to us. And so in this passage, I want to show how there is a diagnosis of our hearts and there is also a prescription for our hearts as well as Jesus, our doctor, speaks to us.

[5 : 26] So let's look at the diagnosis first. It's an uncomfortable diagnosis. He has just revealed the hearts of many Pharisees in a very hostile dinner party that a Pharisee has invited him to.

You can see that in chapter 11, a little further up from verses 37 and following. Jesus has called them out for wickedness and greed in their hearts and neglecting justice and God's love.

And the party ends on a pretty sour note with the lawyers and the Pharisees pressing him hard at the beginning of our passage in verse 1153.

They are now planning to ambush him and catch him in saying anything that can be used against him, any way that he can be put out of the way. Now, I've been learning a lot about Pharisees this week.

And the name means one who is separated. They were lay people. They weren't ordained. They were forming a social populist movement that emphasized separation from Gentiles, separation from anything that would make you unclean ritually, and separate themselves from any Jew who was irreligious.

[6 : 49] They were very popular with the common person. And they were a real contrast with the elitist Sadducees who were in control of the temple worship, who were ordained aristocrats.

You see, the Pharisees taught that you could live a very religious life outside the temple. It didn't matter what your status was. You didn't need to be a priest to perform rituals and rules, and you could apply the Jewish law to sanctify every part of your life.

There was an attraction about that. It became the religion of the common person that anyone could participate in. It was centered in the synagogues, in the little towns and villages everywhere.

So that sounds not too bad. Why was Jesus so strong in rebuking them at that dinner? Well, here's the hard diagnosis.

It was because their hearts had become godless. Even as they were honored by people for being holy and teaching God's word, their hearts were filled with wickedness and malice.

[8 : 00] That's what we prayed at the beginning. Jesus was shining God's light into their hearts so they could see how far away from God that they had become. They were in deep spiritual danger in rejecting the only one who could change their hearts, who could make them alive to God.

They were rejecting Jesus. Now, earlier in Mark 7, Jesus makes the perfect, clear diagnosis of their hearts. And I want to read this to you.

Mark 7, 6 and 7, he says to the Pharisees very clearly, Well, did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites. As it is written, This people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me.

In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandments of God and you hold to the traditions of men.

You see, he's saying that their words and their deeds mean nothing to God because their hearts are far away from him. Now, when Jesus uses that word hypocrite, it doesn't mean being insincere or putting on an act.

[9 : 21] They sincerely believe that in keeping these commandments of men that they had created, they were actually honoring God and they were maintaining his religion and his structures.

They saw themselves as zealous for God. That's what Paul says in his own testimony. But what they couldn't see is that their hearts had become hard towards God.

Their devotion to their cause had actually replaced their devotion to God, their living relationship to God. So the Bible says that the hypocrisy was actually malice towards God.

It was evil. It was stopping people from seeing the kingdom of God come in Jesus. And you can see that in the many ways that they hated Jesus and saw him as their greatest threat.

Now, how could this happen? How could their hearts become godless? Well, there's two ways that I want to share with you and they are deeply connected. The first is that the Pharisees became careless with the word of God.

[10 : 30] That's why Jesus says, you have left the commandment of God and you have held fast instead to the traditions of men. You see, the Pharisees were holding loosely to the Bible and instead they were holding fast to an oral tradition, which was an addition to the Bible.

It consisted of debate and commentary and rules over many years that they had created that constantly developed and they considered that to be on par with God's word. It was actually just a contemporary expression of religion, a cultural expression that was really a reflection of that religious society.

It was the spirit of the age. You know, it said, I can make myself clean. I can make myself acceptable to God. I can do a religion on my own terms as I follow the rules and create a strong nation and society.

You see, the Pharisees very much conformed to the spirit of their age and they led that thinking. For them, it was a great thing. It meant being recognized, meant being respected, and having status in that society, which they loved.

[11 : 49] You see, they feared what people would say and they earnestly desired to be popular and to be respected. But in their neglect of God's word, they could not will what God willed and therefore they rejected his son.

And that leads to the second reason for their godless hearts. They were actually careless about their hearts. They were not vigilant about what was happening in them.

And you see, here's the connection. God reaches our hearts through his word. That's how he speaks to us. That's how he reaches deep inside of us.

The Bible opens God's heart to us and he reveals our own deep need for his grace and for his mercy, for the change that only he can bring.

However, because they neglected God's word, they could not see that their hearts were far from God. The Bible says our hearts are deceitful and we deeply need to hear God speak his truth, his living word, into our inner life so that we are renewed day by day in that truth.

[13 : 04] Now there is something very, very relevant about this to our own society. The Pharisees say a lot about society.

They, like our society, are deeply influenced by the spirit of our age. They wanted to be liked. They wanted to be followed.

Does that sound familiar? We live in a society that also has commandments of people that are taught as doctrine, as gospel.

And some of these commandments are consistent with God's word. We heard some of that in the conversations on the street today. The commandment to implement social justice.

The command to erase racism. The command to commit to equality. To care for our environment. To respect all people and faiths.

[13 : 58] These are consistent, actually, with what God wants in his word as well. But the spirit of our age goes on to say, we can create this society with a morality that conforms to our desires.

We can determine our identities. We can be people who make this new reality that we have conceived of and we will not be contradicted even by God.

And in fact, we will strongly discipline those who don't conform to these commands by canceling or by shaming. You see, this is a religion of the spirit of our age that has everything to do with pride.

Mark Sayers, an Australian pastor who very insightfully critiques our culture, said, society wants the fruits of the kingdom without the king.

It's very well put. There is no need in this spirit of the age for the Lord God who saves us. It is a religion of the self, perfectly autonomous.

[15 : 12] And churches can easily conform to this spirit of the age. I read one writer this week who was very helpful in this. He left evangelicalism because he saw a shallowness in it and a hypocrisy.

And he became involved in something called progressive Christianity. But then he rediscovered God's word again because he saw how shallow progressive Christianity was.

Here's what he said about this movement. He said, I realized that we wanted all of God's blessing without submitting to his loving rule and reign.

We wanted progress without his presence. We wanted justice without his justification. We wanted the horizontal implications of the gospel for society without the vertical reconciliation of sinners with God.

We want society to conform to our standard of moral purity without God's standard of personal holiness. What an indictment.

[16 : 21] This is the spirit of the age and it can quietly infect our hearts and replace our devotion to Jesus Christ as it did for the Pharisees. It is a danger for each of us, Jesus said.

That's why he speaks to his disciples, first of all, Jesus does here, and gets all those thousands of people listening in at the same time.

And in verse 1, here's what he says. Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees. Now that leaven or yeast is conforming to the spirit of the age, very simply.

So that replaces God in our hearts. So that there is a godlessness in our hearts. Now, one of the helpful things about COVID is that bread making has become far more widespread so that we can likely relate to what Jesus is saying here.

You may have made lots of bread during COVID and you will know that yeast is small. You can hardly see it. And a very small amount of that goes into a loaf of bread.

[17 : 31] After you mix it together slowly, after you mix it together, what happens is that slowly but surely, it brings a change that profoundly affects that loaf of bread.

In fact, every part of it is shaped in a profound and powerful way. In the same way, Jesus says, the spirit of our age is unseen.

And it can very quietly affect every part of your life in a powerful way. It can affect the whole church in this way too so that it shapes us.

So that is the diagnosis. That is the danger that Jesus says is infecting the Pharisees and us. What is the prescription then?

How will Jesus heal us? What are the steps that we are to take to open ourselves up to this cure?

Well, it's critical, first of all, that we get back to the very words of Jesus Christ so that we can see God's reality in the midst of a world that strongly influences every part of our life.

[18 : 43] And so Jesus says in our little passage in verses two and three, nothing is covered up, nothing 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 in the housetops. Now, I want to tell you a little something that happens in my neighborhood every morning.

There are two women who take their dogs for a walk at 7 a.m. And they are very loud talkers. You can hear them talking halfway down the block in your house.

And what has happened is that as they're walking their dogs in COVID, they decided they need to be further apart. Well, because they're further apart, the volume has gone up.

And the volume goes up even higher if they are passionate about something or if they are angry about something. So at 7 a.m., if my alarm does not wake me up, I will be wakened by these two women.

[19 : 48] And I will hear the deepest things in their hearts very, very clearly. Well, this is what Jesus is talking about here. He says that our thoughts and our conversations are not our own.

God knows them as well. He will reveal them on the last day as well. Not only that, but our things that are in our hearts, the conversations we have with ourselves and others in secret, they are known in our actions.

Eventually, it comes out. It is seen what we are inside of us. That is what it means to be human.

And what we need to know in all of this is that there will be a judgment day. This is what Jesus is saying.

If you are a Christian, you know that you are already justified. You are accepted by God forever. But you will also be accountable for all that you have said and done, what has come out of your heart.

[20 : 53] So you see, God is very active in verses 2 and 3. If you and I have something to hide, it is a warning to us. If you act faithfully to Christ, this passage is a deep motivation and encouragement as well.

The amazing thing about the day of judgment is that we will not only see what has been worthless in God's eyes about our life, but God will also show us what has been of immense value.

We know that this will have to do with the fruits of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control.

Which comes out of a heart that is changed by the gospel, changed by the Holy Spirit. This is what God does in us as we receive this healing gospel into our lives.

He strengthens us to keep step with the Holy Spirit's work. And wonderfully, in 1 Corinthians 4-5, God's word tells us that when the Lord comes, He will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness, and He will disclose the purposes of the heart, and then each one of us will receive His commendation or praise from God.

[22 : 23] Isn't that amazing? He will praise us at that judgment day. What a motivation to be loyal and to hold fast to Jesus and His word.

So as we listen closely to Jesus and the whole Bible witness to Him, we need to be concerned, first of all, to our own hearts. This is what we are leaving with today.

We need to be vigilant about our hearts. The only thing that will bring blessings to our society are hearts that are changed by the power of God, by the power of the gospel of Jesus.

Here's the deepest answer to all of these concerns that we see in our society today. His Holy Spirit transforms our relationships with God, with one another, and with all of creation.

He is our peace. He breaks down the walls of hostility between us and God and between one another. It is the peace that the world needs and it is only found in Christ.

[23 : 33] That gospel is precious. It is powerful. It is the only thing of real and lasting value that we as a church have to give to the world.

May we be vigilant about our hearts, steadfast, holding fast to the word of Jesus Christ. So I want to end this sermon with Psalm 86.

It's a wonderful psalm because he prays for a new heart that Jesus gives. It is an undivided heart that's not pulled in two ways.

It's not like the Pharisees' hearts where the spirit of the age has replaced devotion to God. It's so tempting to think in my heart, and I think you might experience this temptation too, to think, how can I be as much like the world as possible and still be a Christian?

Well, Psalm 86 is completely different. David knows his heart. He knows that it's deceitful. He asks for a heart that is taught by God as we pray and listen carefully to God's word.

[24 : 44] He prays for a united heart that is completely devoted to the one Jesus who is Lord of all. And so in this prayer, fear and reverence for God replaces fear of rejection and loss of status.

You can turn to it now, Psalm 86, and I'll read from chapter, verse 11, and I'll close with this. Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth.

Unite my heart to fear your name. I give thanks to you, O Lord, my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.

For great is your steadfast love towards me. Let us pray. Almighty God, your light in my heart is uncomfortable as it searches us out.

But how great is your steadfast love to each of us. To you, all hearts are open. All desires are known. From you, no secrets are hidden.

[25 : 53] May you cleanse the thoughts of our hearts and unite them by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may love you completely and rightly magnify your holy name through Christ our Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.