

Fear God, Not People

Luke 12:1-12

Key Verse: 12:5

“But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”

After Jesus rebuked the religious leaders with six woes, their opposition became fierce and they besieged him with questions. Thousands of people kept coming to Jesus. Some came for healing of a disease or ailment. Others came for counseling. Some came out of curiosity. And some came to critique his message and ministry. In today’s passage, Jesus speaks to his disciples. Jesus gives them four warnings and encouragements. If anyone wants to be a genuine follower of Christ, then he or she must take these warnings and encouragements seriously. Let’s listen to Jesus and learn from him. Especially, let’s pray and learn what it means to fear God.

First, watch out for hypocrisy. Verse 1b says, **“Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: ‘Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.’** Though a large crowd gathered, Jesus spoke first to his disciples. Of course Jesus cared about the crowds. But Jesus had some important things to teach his disciples while he still had time to. Wherever the gospel is preached, lives will be powerfully influenced and crowds will gather. At the same time, there will be opposition. Then how should gospel workers be prepared? Jesus said, **“Be on your guard...”** To be on guard is to be watchful and alert. God’s people have an enemy or adversary to contend with: the devil or Satan, who is evil. The devil is like a roaring lion prowling around looking for someone to devour. Our first defense is to be self-controlled and alert and to resist the devil, standing firm in the faith (1Pe 5:8-9). Christians have faith as our shield and the word of God as our sword (Eph 6:16-17).

On this occasion, Jesus told his disciples to be on guard against hypocrisy. Jesus called it **‘the yeast of the Pharisees.’** What is hypocrisy? The Greek word “hypocrite” means “actor” or “pretender.” **So a hypocrite is one who pretends to be something that he is not, or who says something that he doesn’t really believe. It is a form of lying. In other words, hypocrisy is to say one thing and do quite the opposite.** There is a saying, “Do as I say, not as I do.” Generally, we are quite good at saying how people should live, while not living up to it ourselves. For example, there is an older brother who would often tell his younger brother,

Fear God, Not People

“Don't drink, it's really stupid.” But then the older brother would go and get drunk every weekend. Hypocrisy is focusing on image and impressions, rather than truth and holiness. Hypocrisy is being concerned more about our wardrobe and reputation, than having a clean heart and integrity. Hypocrisy is enthusiastically singing in church, “We've A Story to Tell to the Nations,” but never talking once to our neighbor about Jesus. An unbeliever said to a believer, “I don't want to attend your church; churches are full of hypocrites.” The believer replied, “Please come and join us. One more hypocrite won't hurt.” We are all hypocrites from time to time. But that doesn't excuse our sin of hypocrisy.

Jesus told his disciples to watch out for the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, which was like yeast. Yeast or leaven is added to bread dough to make it rise. Yeast is so small it is nearly invisible. Yet just a tiny amount of yeast can work through a whole batch of dough and cause it to rise. Yeast has infiltrating power. Yeast can be likened to bad influence. Jesus already rebuked the Pharisees for appearing to be clean on the outside while having greed and wickedness on the inside. Their hypocrisy was their self-righteousness, giving the appearance of holiness to others while concealing sin in their hearts. This is what Jesus warned his disciples about. All followers of Jesus must beware of hypocrisy. How then can we defeat hypocrisy? Proverbs 28:13 tells us how: **“He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”** (see also 1Jn 1:9) Sin is like a snowball; if it is confessed, it melts away in God's mercy. But if we try to conceal our sins, it is like rolling the snowball; it only gets bigger, leading to more sin. When David did not repent of his sin of adultery but tried to cover it up, it grew bigger into murder. Only when David admitted before God and the prophet Nathan, **“I have sinned against the LORD,”** could David find forgiveness.

Jesus said we can't hide anything ultimately. Look at verses 2-3. **“There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.”** We can hide our sins from people for a time. But we cannot hide our sins from God. At the same time, the good things we do for God and for others are not always noticed. But they will all be revealed in the end. 1 Corinthians 4:5 says, **“He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.”**

Fear God, Not People

Jesus told his disciples to be on guard against hypocrisy. He did not want his disciples to act or speak to please the crowds. He also did not want them to act and speak out of fear of what people in positions of power and wealth might say or do. Jesus himself showed the good example of not speaking to please the crowd nor speaking out of fear of people. Next Jesus told his disciples whom they should fear.

Second, be afraid of God, not people. Look at verses 4-5. **“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”** Fear of people is the root cause of hypocrisy, for it stems from living to please people ahead of God. It is easy to fear what people say about us or can do to us, especially if they have power over us, like a boss or supervisor or coach or parent. There are also gangsters and criminals whom we can easily fear. **How can we overcome fear? We must have a greater power with us.** For example, a person walking alone at night might be fearful of a stronger-looking person walking toward him. But if he knows martial arts, he may not be fearful. But if someone points a gun at him, he could again be fearful. **So fear comes from lack of confidence in our provision, protection or preservation. Jesus told us the best secret to overcome fear of harm or loss: it is to fear God. No one likes to suffer harm or loss, and no one in his right mind wants to die. But Jesus said that there is something much more terrible to fear, much more eternally awful: hell.**

What is hell? The Greek word for hell is ‘Gehenna’ and it came from the Hebrew meaning “Valley of Hinnom.” This valley was outside Jerusalem and was a place where carcasses and trash were perpetually burning. Jesus used the word hell to describe a real place of terrible torment and suffering, a place where the fire is not quenched and the worm does not die, a place where people are weeping and gnashing their teeth.

Frankly, we don’t like to think about or talk about hell or God’s judgment. And it is not popular to preach on it. Most theologians acknowledge that it is a terrible doctrine. Yet the Bible talks about it and Jesus spoke of it. So we must acknowledge that hell exists and sincerely warn others of it as Jesus did. In 1741, Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon entitled, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” to a congregation in Connecticut. The pastor of the church had invited Edwards to speak since the congregation seemed stiff and unresponsive to God’s

Fear God, Not People

word. In his sermon, Edwards described the imminent danger of hell awaiting every man, woman and child. None of our good efforts at self righteousness will save us. Jesus Christ is our only hope and appeal. We need the mercy of God. Some have called it the greatest American sermon ever preached. Some regarded it as controversial. Some Christian historians said it was a critical spark of the revival called the Second Great Awakening.

We need to fear God, both in our personal lives and in our churches. Why should we fear God? Because Jesus said, **“I will show you whom you should fear...”** Jesus showed us how to not fear people. Jesus showed us God, who is holy, righteous and almighty. This God, whom Jesus showed us, is whom we should fear. The fear of God overcomes the fear of people. An older man once walked away from a church service and was soon the victim of an attempted robbery. The robber pointed a gun at the old man and said, “Give me your money or I’ll shoot!” The old man replied, ‘Go ahead and shoot, I just said my prayers.’” The robber fled. The man was not afraid to die because he was confident in his standing with God. Why should we fear God? Because God is the Judge, who has the power to send people to hell. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom, but fools despise wisdom and discipline (Prov 1:7; 9:10). The fear of God can keep a man from sinning (Ex 20:20). It is said of the church father Chrysostom (347-407 A.D.) that he was not afraid of being put in a dungeon for that would give him quiet time with God, nor was he afraid of being executed for then he would be with the Lord. But he was afraid of sinning. Sin is what hinders and disrupts our communion with God. Our sins and iniquities are what displease God and, if not resolved, separate us from God. Jesus taught us to take drastic action to remove sin from our lives (Mt 5:29). That is important in fearing God. The conclusion of the book of Ecclesiastes exhorts us: **“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”**

I want to ask you what someone asked me the other night: “Do you fear God?” I dare say that in our generation we have been accustomed to think that it is not ‘healthy’ to fear God, but rather that our motivation of Christian faith should be purely the love of God. Some Christians think that fearing God was something to be done in the Old Testament days, but with the coming of Christ our motivation should be exclusively, if not primarily, love rather than fear. But this has caused many of us Christians to become too comfortable with God. The Bible tells us that the fear of God is closely related to loving God. Abraham showed that he would’ve

Fear God, Not People

obeyed God to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering. But the angel of the LORD stopped him saying, **“Now I know that you fear God, for you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”** (Gen 22:12) Abraham’s fear of God superseded his love for his son Isaac. Fear of God empowered Abraham to obey God and receive God’s blessing.

Now that we have considered Jesus’ command to fear God, Jesus gives us some very encouraging and reassuring words of truth in verses 6-7. He says, **“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”** Are these not two amazing and encouraging verses? Somebody was so moved by these words to write a song titled, “His Eye Is On the Sparrow.” For his eye is on the sparrow and I know he’s watching me. Jesus showed us God, who is to be feared. Jesus now shows us that this same God is to be trusted and loved. God knows and God sees all the details in the world. God has even numbered the hairs on our heads! Unless you are bald, you surely do not know how many hairs are on your head. But God knows. He knows before and after you comb your hair how many hairs are on your head. God is keeping track. God’s knowledge is greater than any supercomputer or all the world’s computers put together. More importantly, God doesn’t just know and see everything. God cares. Jesus said that our heavenly Father knows what we need even before we ask him. We are worth more than many sparrows to God. So we see that proper fear of God is related to loving and trusting God as well.

Third, speak up for Jesus. Look at verses 8-10. **“I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.”** Some of us know the story of Cassie Bernall. She was one of those killed in the Columbine High School massacre in 1999. Cassie was not embarrassed to carry her Bible or read it at school. She acknowledged Christ before people, including her high school classmates. Jesus promises that those who acknowledge him on earth will be acknowledged by him in heaven before the angels of God. We know that Peter disowned Jesus on the night of Jesus’ arrest. But Peter later repented and spoke up for Jesus. Actually, all the apostles abandoned Jesus in fear. But they all later stood up for Jesus, except for Judas the betrayer. People of Jesus’ day could speak against him and still be forgiven. Apostle Paul had once been a persecutor of Christians. But Jesus called and

Fear God, Not People

forgave him. Paul wrote: **“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”** (1 Tim 1:15-16). Jesus’ patience and mercy is great. But one who blasphemes the Holy Spirit and ultimately rejects the gospel of salvation will not be forgiven.

Fourth, don't worry, the Holy Spirit will teach you. Jesus again encouraged his faithful followers in verses 11-12: **“When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”** Jesus foreknew that his disciples would be persecuted as he was. Jesus told them not to worry for he would be with them through the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises to be with those who stand up for him. Jesus is with his followers through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our Helper and Counselor. The Holy Spirit gives us power to live the Christian life and to testify to others of his grace and truth.

Peter once boldly declared that he would die for Jesus. But he utterly failed when he depended on himself. Out of fear, he became a big hypocrite, who denied Jesus before a servant girl. Later, by the help and power of the Holy Spirit, Peter boldly proclaimed Jesus as Lord and Christ without fear to the same authorities who had condemned and killed Jesus. Through Peter’s Spirit-filled message, 3000 people repented and believed in Jesus that day.

Jesus gave his followers and us warnings and encouragements: watch out for hypocrisy; fear God, not people; speak up for Jesus; and don’t worry, the Holy Spirit will help and guide us. Following Jesus is not about upholding our image before men. Genuine discipleship is about living in the fear of God by the help of the Holy Spirit. May the fear of God be with us to drive out all our fear of people and make us a good influence by his grace.