

FEAR GOD, NOT MEN

Luke 12:1-12

Key Verse: 12:4,5

“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.”

In the last passage we learned that God sent Jesus into the world to shed his light on all mankind who are walking in the darkness and in the shadow of death. Jesus' light is always shining 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, century after century, through all eternity. However, without good eyes, we cannot see the light of Jesus; we can see only the things of this world and dwell in darkness. We can have good spiritual eyesight when we sincerely repent our sins before God. Then we can see Jesus and his mighty work going on all around us. The more we let his light shine in us, the brighter our inner person becomes until our minds, hearts and souls are full of light. Then we can live in the light and be happy and a source of blessing to others. We can sing, “Shine Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father's glory,” until God makes America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

In today's passage Jesus warns his disciples about the bad influence of the Pharisees. Jesus encourages his disciples to be bold witnesses of Jesus at the risk of their lives. To do so, they must know that God is the sovereign Ruler of all men, who governs each one's eternal destiny. In a word, they must learn to fear God, not men.

First, guard against the yeast of the Pharisees (1-3).

Look at verse 1. “Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: ‘Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.’” After being rebuked by Jesus, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were furious. They began to oppose Jesus fiercely and to besiege him with questions. But ordinary people were captured by Jesus' shepherd's heart as he spoke the truth in love. They found their good shepherd in Jesus and they flocked around him. So many thousands gathered around him that they were trampling on one another. To Jesus, there was a wonderful opportunity for fruitful ministry. At the same time, there was a grave spiritual danger. It was the yeast, or bad influence, of the Pharisees. Bad influence can spread, like yeast through dough, until it contaminates an entire community or even a nation. The Pharisees knew that Jesus was the Messiah. But they rejected him and hardened their hearts because they did not want to repent, especially for being greedy and stealing God's glory for themselves. Instead, they would use their positions to thwart the work of God through Jesus. They were most deceptive. Jesus warned his disciples to guard against the bad influence of the Pharisees. The disciples must guard their own hearts against hypocrisy. In addition, they must protect God's sheep from the bad influence of hypocrisy.

Jesus does not want us to be naive about the bad influence of religious hypocrites. When William Carey, the father of modern missions, first spoke of going to India as a missionary, a church elder said forcefully, “Sit down, young man! If God wants to evangelize the heathen, he will do so by his own power without consulting you or me.” But Mr. Carey overcame this bad influence through prayer and made a clear decision to obey Jesus' world mission command. As we have studied in Luke's gospel, Jesus wants us to learn the compassion of God for all kinds of people. By God's grace, the compassion of Jesus is growing in our hearts. For example, Joe Grady wants to be a Bible teacher. Some second-generation missionaries have more one-to-one Bible studies than their parents do. God is working mightily in our midst. But we must know that agents of the devil want to thwart the work of God. They may look like holy people, but they are most unhappy about God's work going on. If we talk with one of them, we suddenly feel strange. We lose hope for our sheep. We lose the motivation to teach the Bible. We feel like sitting down in despair or indulging in pleasure-seeking. At that moment, we must sense that the bad influence of the Pharisees is working against us. We must ask God's help to guard our hearts against it. We must keep our hearts burning with the love of God. We must have a shepherd's heart for God's people. May God help us to do so.

While speaking verses 1-3, Jesus must have considered the coming events. The Pharisees would do their best to make Jesus look like a bad man and to present themselves as the guardians of righteousness. They would manipulate common people until they forgot all the good things Jesus had done and said, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” They would hold a kangaroo court to condemn Jesus and manipulate the Roman legal system to have Jesus executed. At his crucifixion, they would place him between criminals to make him look like a criminal. But Jesus knew that truth

would win in the end. Look at verse 2. “There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.” Now we see that all the evildoing of the Pharisees has been well documented for all of history. More importantly, we see that Jesus is the Savior of the world. The truth is self-evident. The truth makes itself known even though liars try to conceal it. We must know the character of the truth. It will be fully revealed in the course of time.

In the beginning days of UBF USA, many American young people responded enthusiastically to the word of God. Then an organization called the Cult Awareness Network began to pay attention to UBF. They claimed to be religious watchdogs who could help young people avoid destructive cults. But their real motive was money. They did not mind ruining young Christians or their families for a few thousand dollars. They were so clever that they fooled the American justice system at first. But soon it became obvious that they were nothing more than criminals. In the course of time their evil deeds were exposed and they were put into jail for kidnaping and other violent crimes. Such organizations rise throughout history, prompted by the devil. Their campaigns seem powerful and destructive. But they are based on lies. They cannot stand. In the end, the truth exposes and lays bare all the plots and schemes of the devil. By the way, the work of God in UBF has grown deep and wide. In the end, the truth alone remains and endures—indestructible, unchanging, everlasting. As the hymn goes, “His truth is marching on.”

Second, fear God, not men (4-7).

Look at verse 4. “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more.” Here, Jesus calls his disciples “friends.” Jesus did not consider them hypocrites. Jesus had faith that they would not be hypocrites in the future. Through common life together with Jesus they had learned to live in the light to the degree that Jesus called them “friends.” But there was a danger for them to be fearful before evil men. So Jesus taught them how to overcome fear. They must know that the power of the Pharisees was limited. At most, they could kill the body. It was the devil behind them who wielded the fear of death. But Jesus had already defeated the devil’s power. Jesus came to set us free from the fear of death (Heb 2:15). Jesus showed us by his own example. After his betrayal, in the span of several hours, Jesus went through the most painful and shameful torture, trial, crucifixion and death. Yet Jesus was never afraid. In fact, Jesus made his boldest claim to be the Messiah while on trial before the religious leaders (Mk 14:62). Jesus encouraged Pilate to repent his cowardice and stand on the side of truth (Jn 18:37). Jesus listened to the plea of a condemned criminal and promised him paradise that day (Lk 23:43). Finally, Jesus gave up his spirit with a shout of victory that was so clear it made a hardened Roman centurion cry out, “Surely this man was the Son of God” (Mk 15:39). Jesus was not afraid to die. And he tells us, “...do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more.”

Last summer, God opened the door for us to participate in the Indonesian Summer Bible Conference for the first time. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Recently, her relations with the United States have not been very good. The U.S. State Department issued travel advisories for those planning to go to Indonesia, for some have been killed recently. Christians are regularly persecuted there. It was a dangerous situation. But Mother Barry made a decision to attend the conference to pray for and support our missionaries there. She was ready to give her life for the mission in Indonesia, and not only her, but Dr. Mark Yoon, Missionary Wesley Jun and Pastor Kevin Albright as well. Before leaving for Indonesia, Pastor Kevin told his children, “Goodbye. If I don’t come back, remember to fear God and obey your mother. And I will see you in the kingdom of God.” God protected Pastor Kevin and brought him back safely to his family. But our missionaries in Indonesia are still there. They are the real heroes of faith and good examples to us. Actually, no one in Chicago UBF has been killed while inviting students to Bible study on the campuses. The worst thing that happens to us is to be told, “No,” or to receive a wrong phone number. May God help us not to be afraid, but to proclaim Jesus boldly on all Chicago area campuses.

Look at verse 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.” Physical death is not the end of everything. After death, there is the judgment. Hebrews 9:27 says, “Just as man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment.” At the judgment, God Almighty will determine each person’s eternal destiny. Revelation 21:8 says, “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.” It is interesting that the cowardly, those who fear men, are number one on the list of those who go to hell.

Believing in hell has helped many a person to repent of hypocrisy and overcome the fear of men. Still, some ask, “How could a good God send people to hell?” According to their common sense it seems unlikely. But the Bible is very clear about the existence and character of hell. The word here translated “hell” is repeated twelve times in the New Testament, eleven times by Jesus (Mt 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33; Mk 9:43,45,47; Lk 12:5; Jas 3:6). It is a place of eternal condemnation and punishment in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. God has the power to send men to hell for eternal punishment. So we must fear God.

However, to “fear God” does not mean to be frightened of God. To “fear God” means to have holy reverence and awesome respect for God. It means to realize who God really is and to honor him first in our hearts. The fear of God leads us to repentance. The fear of God leads us to realize God’s love. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” The love of God is the antidote to the fear of men and to debilitating cowardice. 1 John 4:18 says, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” When we fear God, we do not need to fear anything else. Romans 8:15 says, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”

Jesus really wanted his disciples to know the love of God and to believe God’s sovereign guidance upon their lives. Look at verses 6-7. “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.” God’s sovereign rule extends to each sparrow and even the hair on our heads. One person was amazed that God knows the names and addresses of all people on earth without using a Palm Pilot. Yet God’s wisdom, understanding and knowledge are far greater than that. Theologians say that God is omniscient. It means that God knows everything. God knows what each sparrow in his world is doing. God knows how many hairs are on my head and your head right now. There was a young missionary who has a brilliant mind. But he was a typical young man in his passion and pride. Once, he got upset and was on the verge of abandoning his missionary calling. Suddenly the hairs in the middle of his head began to fall out. The young missionary became very serious about what he was doing. He listened to the counsel of God’s servant and repented. Then his hair grew back and became fuller than before. It was the beginning of a most fruitful life as God’s servant. To this degree, God knows and watches over us and works for our spiritual good. Jesus’ point is that we should not be afraid because we are precious to God. We learn from Jesus the absolute trust in God’s sovereignty for our personal lives and the work of God. Our lives are in God’s hands.

Third, acknowledge Jesus before men (8-12).

Look at verse 8. “I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God.” What Jesus really wants his disciples to do is proclaim to all men that Jesus is their personal Savior and the Savior of the world. Jesus knew they would be persecuted for doing so. But the world salvation plan of God was in their hands. Whoever heard the gospel and believed would be saved. Whoever did not believe would be condemned. They were God’s instruments to spread the gospel that brings eternal life or eternal punishment. Therefore, men should be frightened before the disciples, because they carried the message of God that gives eternal life to those who believe and eternal punishment to those who reject it.

Jesus promised that whoever acknowledges him before men will be acknowledged by him before the angels of God. St. Stephen boldly proclaimed that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world before the Jewish Sanhedrin. They were so furious that they gnashed their teeth and clenched their fists. But Stephen did not look at them. He looked up and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. As they were stoning him, he prayed, “Lord Jesus receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Jesus welcomed him to heaven as a victorious witness of Jesus Christ. Moreover, Stephen’s martyrdom was the catalyst in the conversion of St. Paul, who spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. On the other hand, verse 9 says, “But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God.”

Look at 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.” This is not an excuse for messengers or testimony sharers to speak at random without prayerful preparation. Rather, it is a promise that in the time of persecution, the Holy Spirit will be with Jesus’ people to give them words and wisdom that none of their adversaries can resist or contradict. Therefore, we do not need to worry about what will happen in the time of persecution. God will be with us through the Holy Spirit to reveal his glory through us.

In this passage Jesus teaches us to fear God, not men. When we fear God we do not need to be afraid of anyone or anything else. We can preach the gospel boldly in this dark world. We can have the assurance of eternal life and a living hope in the kingdom of God. May God help us.