

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 your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to fulfill God’s will for world salvation. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and the experts in the law for their corrupt and unclean hearts. As a result, they opposed Jesus all the more fiercely. All the while, Jesus kept teaching his disciples, preparing them for trials ahead of them as followers of Jesus Christ. May we all take Jesus’ teachings to heart personally, to fear and trust God while living in this fallen world.

This passage opens saying, **“Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another...”** Thousands of people were flocking to Jesus, some out of curiosity, most with desperate problems. To each one, their own problem must’ve felt most urgent, so that they did not care too much about the others who were there. They were pushing and shoving and even stepping on one another. In our days we have heard of people who have been trampled to death by crowds thronging for other reasons: rock concerts, soccer games or department store super sales. Jesus’ popularity was escalating. At the same time, his enemies were plotting and scheming to destroy his credibility. What could Jesus do in this situation? Jesus taught his disciples.

First, watch out for hypocrisy (1-3).

Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: **“Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”** Though thousands of people were thronging to Jesus, here Jesus focused his attention on his disciples, who were committed to him. There is a time to reach out to the masses. There is also a time to focus on discipleship. For Jesus, this was an important discipleship moment.

The words **“be on your guard”** are defensive words which mean, “watch out!” Jesus’ disciples had to defend their minds and hearts against the **“yeast of the Pharisees.”** Yeast is an almost invisible influence that sours bread dough. Jesus said the yeast of the Pharisees was “hypocrisy.” Hypocrisy means to pretend to be better than you really are. It is to say one thing and do something quite

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contrary. It is to not practice what you preach, that is, to be deceitful. Jesus said the Pharisees looked good on the outside, but inside they were full of greed and hypocrisy.

Jesus wants his disciples to not just appear to be godly, but to truly pursue godliness. That means if you are lying, cheating, gossiping or feeding your lust through pornography, stop it. Be on your guard against deceit and hypocrisy. Confess your sins to God and earnestly seek his kingdom and his righteousness.

Jesus continued: “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.” For disciples of Jesus, our righteousness must not be merely public, that is, simply attending meetings. Jesus wants our righteousness to permeate and fill our private, secret lives, to think, speak and act for God to know, hear and see.

What do you think, say and do when only God is watching? As sinners, everyone has thought, said and done embarrassing and shameful things that we don’t want anyone to know, hear or see. But God knows, hears and sees everything that everyone thinks, says and does. So unless we repent and confess it to God, we will be ashamed someday. Therefore, we should repent of pretense and deceit in our lives and pursue righteousness. Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 2:22-23: **“Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.”**

Second, fear God, not people (4-5).

Jesus kept teaching in 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 your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”** Jesus knew he would face a martyr’s death. He also knew his followers would also be persecuted and killed. We are naturally afraid of death, since we have not seen heaven: that is, we have not died and returned to tell about it. Our desire to live is indeed strong. Some people have survived disasters, out of a strong desire to keep living. It is natural to

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seek a safe place in this world. But there is no safe place in this world. Death can strike any time, any place, by terrorism, disaster or heart attack. Then what must we do? Jesus tells us: Fear God, who is the Judge of all souls, and who determines our ultimate and eternal destiny.

What does it mean to fear God, and how do we do that? To fear God is to know that he is the judge of our souls; he determines our eternal destiny. To fear God is to love and honor God, more than any person, even ourselves. This is not natural or easy. It is supernatural. It is possible only by the help and power of the Holy Spirit.

When Abraham feared God, he loved God more than his own son and was ready to sacrifice him in obedience to God. When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego feared God, they were ready to die in a fiery furnace, though God saved them by a miracle. When Daniel feared and loved God, he kept praying despite the king's prohibition, even though it meant being put in a locked room with lions. When Joseph feared God, he resisted the seductive advances of his boss' wife. When Queen Esther feared God, she kept her identity along with the Jewish people, although it meant possible loss of the palace and her life. When Moses feared God, he made the same decision as Esther to identify with God's people though he actually forfeited the treasures and pleasures of Egypt.

On July 6, 1415, 601 years ago, the Bohemian priest, John Huss was burned at the stake for heresy. Before he was killed, he was given the opportunity to recant his teachings to save his life. He answered: "God is my witness that the things charged against me I never preached. In the same truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught, and preached, drawing upon the sayings and positions of the holy doctors, I am ready to die today."¹

How about you? Can you say that you are ready to die today? Are you willing to die for Jesus or to suffer for him? I know I'm often too easy-going, complacent and comfort-seeking. I often want to save my life. So I'm often reminded and guided by Mark 8:35, my life key verse, in which Jesus said, "**For**

¹ Schaff, David Schley. *John Huss: His life, teachings and death, after five hundred years*, (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), p. 257.

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whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” Only God is the Judge of our souls. Only God determines our eternal destiny. Only God is the One to fear.

Third, God knows and cares about sparrows and hairs (6-7).

Jesus gives two illustrations why we should fear and love God in 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.”** Sparrows were very cheap in Jesus’ day. Two sparrows sold for one hour of labor. So, sparrows weren’t worth much. They were not so valuable. Yet Jesus said, **“not one [sparrow] is forgotten by God.”**

In 1905 Civilla Martin had a friend who was ill but who believed in God’s love because she remembered that God cares for the sparrows. Civilla was inspired to write a song titled, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow”:

Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come?
Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heav’n and home?
When Jesus is my portion? My constant Friend is He.
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

I sing because I’m happy; I sing because I’m free.
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

Jesus gave one more illustration of God’s detailed care for us, saying: **“...the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”** Let me ask you: do you know how many hairs you have on your head? I think only a bald person knows. I don’t think there is any completely bald person here. Bald is also beautiful. The point is: You have no idea how many hairs are on your head. But God knows! He knows so much more about you than you know about yourself! He knows how many hairs you have before and after you take a shower or get a haircut. And he knows that for every person on earth! Greater than any supercomputer. God knows all this! But he doesn’t just know. He cares. He cares about us in detail. This is hard to simply believe when we hear of acts of violence and disaster on the news

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every day. We many think, “Where was God when that happened?” 1 Peter 5:7 says, **“Cast all your anxiety on [God] because he cares for you.”**

There is a similar verse in the short book of Nahum. I think I’ve never quoted Nahum before. Though Nahum is mostly about prophetic judgment on Nineveh, verse 7 is encouraging: **“The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him...”**

Fourth, speak up for Jesus (8-12).

Have you ever told someone about Jesus or identified yourself as a follower of Jesus Christ? If so, when was the last time? Was it difficult? Probably if the person you mentioned it to was a Christian, it was quite easy. Maybe it was in response to them saying first that they are Christian. That’s even easier. What if the environment is not so favorable for a Bible believer?

Jesus continued speaking to his disciples: **“I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God.”** To side with Jesus is not easy when believing in him is illegal or controversial or just unpopular. We thank God for eight of our children in our church who made public confessions of faith and were baptized yesterday. May God strengthen and raise them as faithful, bold and fruitful witnesses of Jesus Christ.

When we love someone, we don’t want them to get hurt, not physically and not in reputation. If we love Jesus, we will honor his name. We will also want to represent him respectably by our words and actions. It means we must not act like the world, for example, calling people names in anger if we get cut off in traffic. As followers of Christ, when we misrepresent Jesus, we must repent and confess our sins, sometimes privately, sometimes publicly, if necessary. In our materialistic, pleasure-seeking and self-centered society, we may be tempted to withdraw from or blend in with the world like a chameleon, changing our colors to fit in. Jesus wants us to shine his light in the darkness and not be ashamed of him.

Jesus also said, **“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.”** People can say something against Jesus in ignorance. But those

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who persistently resist the Holy Spirit have no means of forgiveness. An example from Moses' day was Pharaoh king of Egypt. When he kept resisting God's message saying, **"I don't know the Lord. I will not obey,"** he was setting himself up for disaster and destruction. Jesus' critics were making the same mistake by saying Jesus' ministry was from the devil. Unless they repented, they would not be forgiven. Jesus made this forgiveness possible for us all when he prayed as he was dying on the cross, **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"** (Lk 23:34). Jesus did not hold our sins against us, but prayed for sinners to be forgiven.

In the closing verses 11-12 in this passage Jesus said, **"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 knew that persecution would come from the Jewish leaders and also from the Roman authorities. Jesus was preparing himself and his disciples for such ordeals. In moments of persecution, it looks like powerful people with authority are in charge. But God is ultimately in charge. And God gives courage and wisdom through the Holy Spirit to those who trust in him.

In our free country we are not yet in much danger of open persecution, imprisonment or death to live as followers of Jesus Christ or to openly share our faith and hope in Christ. Some countries have that danger, like nations of enforced Muslim law. Our temptations and spiritual battle is much more subtle. We are rather attacked spiritually by things like materialism, pleasure-seeking, peer pressure, job security, slander, envy, hypocrisy. The attacks are more inward than outward.

Jesus calls us to throw off everything that hinders like hypocrisy, fear and worry. Jesus calls us as his disciples to seek his kingdom and righteousness as a priority and earnest pursuit. At the World Mission Report conference in Korea we studied Deuteronomy. God knew that once his people settled in the Promised Land they would forsake God and worship idols. They would forget God's grace and commands to pursue their own pleasures and dreams according to their own standards and preferences. People in every generation are prone to fear, worry and hypocrisy. This was true of Moses' day, of Jesus' day and it is true of our day. Jesus tells his friends the secret to victorious Christian living, to living lives that glorify God and lead to eternal life and blessing: fear God.

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The writer of Ecclesiastes concluded: **“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.”** (Eccl 12:13)

Isaiah understood the same truth: **“The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.”** (Isa 8:13)

In preparing this message I researched “Don’t be afraid” in the Bible. One common reason to not be afraid was God’s promise, **“I am with you.”** Paul wrote, **“If God is for us, who can be against us?”** (Ro 8:31) God’s presence with us gives us peace and assurance to overcome fear of man and circumstances.

To fear God is to love God and to trust God, to know that we are worth more than many sparrows, and that the hairs of our head are all numbered. May we fear and trust God and grow as Jesus’ faithful and fruitful disciples.