

Sermon 64: Luke 12:1-12: Preparations for Persecution

OUTLINE

Avoid hypocrisy considering the judgement of God
Do not fear trusting in the care of God
Confess Christ depending on the Spirit of God

INTRODUCTION

The love of man's praise and the fear of man's wrath are the sins that Jesus warns His disciples of in this next section, 12:1-12. Jesus has just painted a target on His back and the back of His disciples by His confrontation with the religious leaders in 11:37-54. He has spoken to the Pharisees about their own sins; now He will speak to His disciples about the Pharisees sins. This next section is all about preparing for persecution. Jesus has kicked the hornet's nest, they will kill Him, but Jesus has also just prophesied that they will kill and persecute the prophets and apostles that He is sending, 11:49. The rest of chapter 12 can read under the title of Trust and Obey, as Christ calls His disciples to faithfulness in the face of opposition.

Today we will be looking at 12:1-12, and we will be dividing this section up under three headings. Each section deals with a command in light of the coming resistance, an evaluation of the sins of the religious leaders, and a reminder of something we find in God to help us resist sin and do our duty. Firstly, v1-3, we are to avoid hypocrisy considering the judgement of God, here Jesus reveals that the sins of the hypocrites will inevitably be judged. Secondly, v4-7, we are not to fear while trusting in the care of God, here Jesus reveals the weakness of the persecutors to do any real harm. Thirdly, v8-12, we are to confess Christ depending upon the Spirit of God, here Jesus exposes the nature of the persecutor's sin as blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

Avoid hypocrisy considering the judgement of God

V1, 'In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.'" Once again Luke is alerting us to the huge numbers of people around Christ. Many thousands, it sounds like Revival, if we saw anything like this today, we would feel like celebrating, this would feel like success. But Jesus knows the persecution that is coming, despite the apparent favor He has with the crowd now, things will change and the persecution will come. At a time when we would be relishing the apparent triumph Jesus issues a warning. 'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.'

The word hypocrisy we know comes from the world of the stage, it is used to describe an actor. In the ancient world an actor would play multiple parts and wear different masks for different roles, switching between masks. This idea of pretending, of acting, of deception became the chosen word to describe someone who said one thing but did another, or someone who was double tongued, a hypocrite. Jesus warns that this sin is leaven. Leaven became associated with uncleanness, as the Passover was to be celebrated with unleavened bread. It is also used to indicate a hidden influence that can permeate the whole lump. The hidden and dangerous nature of such an insidious sin called for alertness.

Of all the things that Jesus chooses to warn His disciples about first, He warns them about the religious sin of hypocrisy. Before He talks about the possibility of them being killed, He warns them to avoid hypocrisy.

We are all liars, we are all prone to the sin of hypocrisy, we are all cowardly and make a pretense of religion to make others think well of us while we sin in our hearts or in secret. This is a very easy sin to fall into, and so we need the warning. I know that many unbelievers accuse all Christians of being hypocrites, and there is some truth in the charge as none of us are able to live up to what we say we should do, but when is someone truly a hypocrite and deserving of the name? The difference between a hypocrite and a Christian struggling with hypocrisy is that the Christian is fighting against the sin and using the truth to remove the sin from their hearts, they are not using the truth as a disguise to hide the sin in their hearts. We must stop and search our hearts, do you have secrets? Do you have hidden sins, either in your thoughts that you indulge which no one but God sees? Or do you have hidden habits in secret? The power of sin is in its secrecy, confess it to a brother or sister in Christ, bring it into the light, become accountable and enable the gift of someone bearing that burden with you help you to be free from it. Prov. 28:13, 'Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.' The sin of hypocrisy will cripple your spiritual progress and hinder your prayer life, Ps. 66:18, 'If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.' Hypocrisy does not only consist in hidden sin, but a religious exterior that hides prayerlessness and lovelessness.

The disciples had the added pressure of denying the truth and pretending that the Judaism of their day is superior to Christ because of the pressure of persecution. Not only did the disciples have to wrestle with the natural hypocrisy that lies in wait in all of our hearts, but they were pressured to be hypocrites because of the hate following Jesus would provoke.

Christ helps His disciples to overcome the temptation to hypocrisy by reminding them of God's judgement, v2-3, 'Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ³Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.' Jesus reminds us of the standards of God's judgement. The religious hypocrite is so busy with external religion that they forget to evaluate their hearts, they are so busy comparing themselves with other men that they do not think of how God sees every action. Jesus reminds us that we will stand before an omniscient judge and every deed will be evaluated by the standards of God's holiness. Jesus is not saying anything new but something taught in the OT, Ecc. 12:14, 'For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.' The emphasis on secret things being judged is repeated often, Rom. 2:16, 'on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.' 1 Cor. 4:5, 'Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.' A delayed judgement may give the impression that God does not take sin seriously, and in the absence of punishment a person often reveals what is in their hearts, but Jesus reminds us that there is an inevitable reckoning. We will all have to stand before God and every deed will be evaluated. You may be able to hide sin from your spouse, from your boss, from your fellow church members, but you cannot hide it from God. Our only hope for judgement day is not in how well we hide our sins, or trying to outweigh the bad we have done with good, all sin is damnable, even the smallest sin. No, our only hope is that someone else will take the punishment that our sins deserve, who will take our judgment day punishment. And good news this is what Jesus did when He died on the cross for our sins. Christians disagree about whether the individual sins of Christians will be displayed on that day or not,

I personally believe that our forgiven sins will be displayed as well as our Spirit enabled good deeds, all to the glory of God. But what all Christians do agree on is that the judgement for every sin can only be paid for by Christ alone, and only those who repent and cry out to God for mercy on the basis of what Christ has done will receive this pardon. Have you done this? When you stand before God on judgement day and your sins will be revealed, will they be revealed as forgiven sins that have been paid in full or will it be a court case where you will be found guilty and you have to suffer the judgement for them yourself?

Do not fear trusting in the care of God

V4, 'I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.' Jesus begins talking about the possibility of their deaths with a reminder about their relationship with Him, 'my friends.' The reason this is helpful is that when persecution comes, perhaps even our death this is not a sign of a bad relationship with Jesus, it is not a sign of His judgement. Jesus issues a command calling His disciples not to fear those who can only kill the body. These words betray Jesus view of anthropology that we are more than merely a body, that we are a body and soul, and that bodily death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. Jesus is reminding us of the limited powers of our enemies, they can kill our bodies and have nothing more that they can do.

An important thought to take from this is that persecution is coming, even in the form of death. I feel like this is a message that we in the West have to refamiliarize ourselves with. The early church was well acquainted with this reality, they heard the call to carry a cross and it did not mean avoiding R16 rated movies, but the real possibility that they would be called upon to die for Christ. There are brothers and sisters in Christ in parts of the world today who have to give their lives in faithfulness to Christ but we have enjoyed a privileged position in the past. But Christianity is now in disfavor, it is seen as unloving, unjust and untrue. Any insistence upon our Christian view of the world in regard to marriage, sexual identity, abortion, euthanasia, recreational marijuana etc. will now be seen as wrong and possibly provoke persecution. The persecution could be informal in that we are socially ostracized and made fun of and verbally abused, or it may be more formal where we will be reprimanded by our employers and possibly lose our jobs. Here is a reminder that persecution is coming, and we should be willing to suffer it, even unto death. Those parts of the Bible which Christians would encourage themselves with and obey even when it cost them their lives have been hypothetical or metaphorically applied, a time is coming when we must be prepared to embrace paying the high price in order to be faithful to Christ.

V5, 'But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!' Jesus proposes that the solution to the fear of man is a fear of God. We are driven by a fear of man when we have made idols of them, in other words we have given them features that are only true of God. God alone gives us eternal happiness, but we make idols of others when we look to them to give us the happiness that only God can give. Likewise when it comes to fearing man we give to them functions that only God should fulfil in our lives. God is the judge, God is the one whose will we should be seeking to fulfil, God is the one whose strength of punishment we should fear not man's. Jesus helps us cure our fear of man by reminding us of who God is, and who we are in relation to God. God is the one with the power to cast body and soul into hell. This is the only time Luke uses the word Gehenna to indicate hell. This is the place of final punishment for the wicked. The name Gehenna derives from the valley of Hinnom where

kings in the OT performed child sacrifices and it was later used as a rubbish dump. It was a picture of what God would one day do to the wicked.

Here Jesus tells us something about His view of eschatology. Eschatology is not only your view of the millennium and the second coming but your view of death and judgement as well. It might interest you to know that just like today there were various opinions on hell. There were those who believed that Gehenna was a place of eternal torment, but there were others who disagreed who thought that it was a place of extinction after 12 months of suffering much like the modern view of annihilationism. There were even those who held to hell being a refining fire where the sinner would go and be cleansed with fire, and then be released, something similar to purgatory. What is the NT view of Hell? For Jesus it is something worse than mere death, for it would have been better to have never been born than go to hell; it is the place where the worm does not die and the fire is never quenched; it is a place of conscious torment where there is a weeping and gnashing of teeth; Jesus calls it a place of eternal punishment, and the book of Revelation confirms that the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. So based on these descriptions which view do you think Christ and the NT teaches, eternal conscious torment, annihilationism, or a temporary purifying fire? It is clear!

Jesus calls upon us not to fear man who is limited in what he can do, but to fear God who has the power to cast people into hell. Do not live to please man but to please God for God has the power to cast into hell. How do we be sure that God will not cast us into hell? The answer is the same as before. Christ has been put forward by God to take our punishment so that any who trust in Him will be counted as righteous, so that His death will be seen as payment for our sin, and His righteousness filling up what is lacking in our obedience to God's law. Christ suffered the wrath of God on the cross that we would not have to suffer it. But this pardon is only for those who are willing to turn their backs on their sins, to claim Christ as Lord and to seek God's mercy on the basis of Christ's work not ours.

V6-7, 'Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. ⁷Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.' Hell is the punishment for those who do not obey God, but Jesus has more encouragement for those who belong to God. Jesus reminds His disciples that God cares for His people. God does not turn His power to punish upon His children but His power to preserve. Here Jesus employs an argument from the lesser to the greater. Sparrows were the cheapest animal you could buy, a cheap rate would be 5 for 2 pennies. Yet God has a knowledge of them, none of them is forgotten. God provides for them and will provide for you as you are of more value than sparrows. Likewise the very hairs of our head are numbered by God. To know is to care, to say God knows is enough, for if He who cares for us knows, then He will act. We are this way with our own children aren't we? As soon as we know that our children have needs we are ready to help because of our care. Jesus utters these words in the context of persecution and facing possible death. This does not mean that we will not have to die. There is no triumphalism here, God caring does not equal that people do not die. Many a naïve teenager has assumed that God caring equals loved ones don't die, and when a loved one dies they conclude God does not care, does not exist and become atheists, this is not what is implied. God's care implies that He will be with you in the suffering, for He will never leave or forsake you; that He will cause good to result from the suffering as He works all things together for the good of those who love Him; it means that if we have to die, that He can empower us to die well and for His glory. It means that in His good purposes and His wisdom that path of suffering service is the good path He has appointed for you. You can face the most trying persecution because you are His friend and He cares for you.

Confess Christ depending on the Spirit of God

V8-9, 'And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, ⁹ but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.' With the rise of persecution an increasing temptation to denounce Christ will arise. Christ makes clear the consequences of those who reject Christ. The parable of the sower talks about the seed sown on rocky ground that springs up quickly but which falters before persecution, Christ outlines the consequences of rejecting Christ. Now we must clarify that the rejection Christ is outlining is not a one off rejection like Peter's who repented and was restored, the rejection under question is not the faltering of an immature Christian but a settled and final denial of Christ. It is the denial of the religious leaders who reject the truth they know, it is the denial of those who joined Christ as disciples but then departed from Him because of persecution or love of the world. Many will deny Christ to please men in this life, either to please the crowd, the prevailing opinion of our age, or in some court room where they are standing trial. If they do then Christ will not call them His before the Father on the day of judgement, He will not claim them as His possession, His people, His bride, they will be His enemies and treated accordingly. A wonderful picture of someone who confessed Christ and was confessed by Christ before the angels was Stephen when he was being martyred. As Stephen was being stoned heaven was opened and he saw Jesus not sitting but standing in prayer, standing to honor, standing to receive a faithful servant. Men may kill us for our stand for Christ but just beyond death are the arms of Christ.

V10, 'And 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.' Christ puts light on the nature of the leaders sin and those who sin like them. A sin against the Son of Man is forgivable because of the cloak of humiliation that would confuse many people that many would sin in their ignorance in their rejection of Him. But the religious leaders are in a different position, they know that He heals by the power of God, they know that He must be from God, yet in order to keep their influence, out of jealousy, out of a sense of pragmatism and so as not to provoke the Romans, Jesus is not only rejected but murdered with a rigged trial, crowd manipulation and political pressure on Pilate. This is the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. It is not sinning in ignorance but sinning against full light. 'The great Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck thus described blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as a sin against the Gospel in its clearest revelation, ... not in doubting or simply denying the truth, but in a denial which goes against the conviction of the intellect, against the enlightenment of conscience, against the dictates of the heart; in a conscious, willful, and intentional imputation to the influence and working of Satan of that which is clearly recognized as God's work, ... in a willful declaration that the Holy Ghost is the Spirit of the abyss, that truth is a lie, and that Christ is Satan himself.'¹ Heb. 6 and 10 talks about those who have been enlightened, those who have been in the church, sat under the preaching of the gospel, and would have been witnesses to the apostles when the gospel was preached who then turned from the truth because of Jewish persecution.

Every Christian wonders whether they have committed this sin at some time in their lives. If you worry over whether you have committed it, you have probably not committed it, because those who have forsaken the truth no longer have those Spiritual instincts. This is not simply committing a sin you know to be sin, or doing a particularly bad sin, it is the sin

1 Ryken, P. G. (2009). *Luke*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (Vol. 1, p. 653).

of walking away from Christ as the truth altogether, it is the sin of apostasy or full rejection of Christ, not brazenly committing a sin.

V11-12, 'And 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, ¹² for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.' The call to take up our crosses and even be willing to die for Christ is a difficult task but Christ reminds us of God's resources, we have the Spirit. These verses reinforce our role as witnesses, as those who speak the truth even when our lives are on the line. But we are told that the Spirit will be with us. This is the encouragement Peter gives to those who were being persecuted, 1 Peter 4:12-14, 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.' What is the significance of this? The Spirit is the Spirit of joy, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of adoption, He will bring all of His gifts and ministry to sustain the child of God in the midst of their trials. There is no greater provision that Christ could have pointed to than the third person of the Trinity with us, fighting for and with us as we bear witness to Christ.

We are nearing a time of increasing persecution and verses like these are going to become well-worn and often referenced passages. In preparing ourselves for faithful witness we too must avoid the sin of hypocrisy by considering the judgement of God; we too must not fear while trusting in the care of God cognizant of the weakness of those who want to do us harm; we too must confess Christ while depending upon the Holy Spirit.