

Luke 12:1-12

God Cares

Nobody like a hypocrite. The word comes from the ancient Greeks, who used it to describe the role that an actor portrayed when on stage. Since the actor was ‘being’ someone he was not in real life, he was a hypocrite. We may appreciate that when we see a movie or go to a play, but no one appreciates a hypocrite in real life. And spiritual hypocrites are the worst of all, for they lead men straight to hell. “¹But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, ²by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron” (1 Timothy 4:1-2).

Hypocrites have been around as long as there has been religion. The Bible speaks of them often and critically. They are usually characterized as people who focus on outward appearances and neglect the spiritual matters within their corrupted hearts. As God told Isaiah warn the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, “¹³Because this people draw near with their words
And honor Me with their lip service,
But they remove their hearts far from Me,
And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote,
¹⁴Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous;
And the wisdom of their wise men will perish,
And the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed” (Isaiah 29:13-14).

We have seen that Jesus frequently called out the Pharisees for their hypocrisy.

“So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men” (Matthew 6:2)

“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men” (Matthew 6:5).

“Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting” (Matthew 6:16).

“They do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments” (Matthew 23:5).

As we saw in the previous passage, one characteristic of hypocrites is that they do not respond well to rebuke, “⁵³when He left there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile and to question Him closely on many subjects, ⁵⁴plotting against Him to catch Him in something He might say” (Luke 11:53-54). As we will see in this passage they also lack discernment. But most importantly, they lack compassion. Think of the paralytic Jesus healed (Luke 5:17-25) or the man with the withered hand (Luke 6:6-11). In each case, the Pharisees were more concerned with their own place as leaders of the Jewish religious community than with the welfare of the wretched people to whom Jesus ministered.

As a result, the opposition to Jesus by the Pharisees increased, even to the point where they tried to explain the miracles Jesus worked as the result of the power of Satan (Luke 11:15). This led to their chastisement by Jesus just recorded in Luke’s narrative.

Context

Luke writes that “under these circumstances” (v. 1) or meanwhile, that is while Jesus was rebuking the Pharisees, “so many thousands of people had gathered together that they were stepping on one another” (v. 1). The numbers are not important, though the fact that there were so many “they were stepping on one another” (v. 1) suggests that there is no good reason to presume exaggeration on Luke’s part.

Whether the crowd had gathered to see Jesus again perform some amazing miracle, or hear Him teach is not recorded. Perhaps their motive was nothing more than to enjoy the volatile controversy between the Pharisees and this itinerant rabbi. In any case, they were there.

Yet Jesus did not address the crowd. At least not at first. Instead He turned His attention to His disciples. “He began saying to His disciples first of all” (v. 1) that they should “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (v. 1). The word need not refer exclusively to the twelve. Jesus was addressing all of those who followed Him. And His admonition was straightforward. His disciples should ‘beware’ or be on guard against the influence of the Pharisees. It was an age-old saying that would one day be sanctified into Scripture, “do not be deceived: ‘bad company corrupts good morals’” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

God Cares about Hypocrisy

The reason was obvious. The disciples should avoid the Pharisees because of their possible influence and, despite the hypocrisy of some in trying to hide it, “there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known” (v. 2). This was not new teaching. Jesus had said much the same thing before, “for nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light” (Luke 8:17). The same teaching was found in the Old Testament, “for God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:14), and would be echoed again by Paul, “therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God” (1 Corinthians 4:5).

It is clear that hypocrites can be successful for a time, but it is also certain that eventually they will be found out. All things will come to light one day. That is a promise of God. ²⁴“The sins of some men are quite evident, going before them to judgment; for others, their sins follow after. ²⁵Likewise also, deeds that are good are quite evident, and those which are otherwise cannot be concealed.” (1 Timothy 5:24-25). Good and evil will both be discovered. Jesus, Himself said, “for the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds” (Matthew 16:27).

This is a result of God’s omniscience. It was a commonplace of Jewish thinking that God knew all things. Nothing could be hidden from Him indefinitely. Adam might hide in the garden, but God would find him out. Job’s friends used this thinking when they tried to convince Job he must have sinned to cause God’s wrath to punish him,

“There is no darkness or deep shadow
Where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves” (Job 34:22).

David said much the same thing,

“Even the darkness is not dark to You,

And the night is as bright as the day.
Darkness and light are alike to You” (Psalm 139:12)

But more than being found out, Jesus said that “whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms will be proclaimed upon the housetops” (v. 3). The “inner rooms” were storehouses deep inside a house where they were not adjacent to any exterior walls. In the architecture of the day, a house could literally be dug into, so possessions near an exterior wall were vulnerable. Riches and valued possessions were kept on the inside, in a sort of closet, where they could be more easily protected. But Jesus said that even deeds done there, in that most secret and private place would be “proclaimed upon the housetops.” To shout it from the flat roof of a house in the small villages of Judea was equivalent to putting it on the front pages of the local paper today. Everyone would know. All would see the sin. Such a thought is sobering.

The principles of the Pharisees are deeply embedded within each of us. None of us is immune. We must always be on our guard against them. To do so, we must cultivate a faith of the heart, for it is the state of our heart that will be judged. We must hate all mocking of our faith by false affectation of holiness. God cares that we are genuine in our faith and not hypocrites.

God Cares about Whom We Fear

Perhaps softening His tone, Jesus continued, “I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do” (v. 4). It seemed with this, Jesus was more specifically addressing His disciples about immediate and near-future events. He was moving from the general to the specific. In the context of life with Jesus, the disciples had many occasions to recognize the hostility of the religious leaders. Perhaps not all of them were tempted to hypocrisy, but each of them was fully aware that there was much to fear in the world around them. The Pharisees were powerful, they had powerful Roman friends, and they would eventually put Jesus to death. The disciples would see this and needed to be warned not to fear them.

Not that Jesus did not want His disciples to fear, but He wanted His disciples to fear God. Jesus was emphatic, “but I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!” (v. 5). The motive for proper fear was unmistakable. To be sure, the Pharisees could have you killed, but God could damn you to eternal punishment.

Gehenna comes from Gē-Hinnōm, which meant the land of Hinnom. It was a valley belonging to that family located just south of Jerusalem. A shrine was built there called Tophet, which means place of abhorrence or place of spitting out. There was a great hole filled with wood that was ignited.

It was dramatically described by the prophet Isaiah,
“For Topheth has long been ready,
Indeed, it has been prepared for the king.

He has made it deep and large,
A pyre of fire with plenty of wood;
The breath of the Lord, like a torrent of brimstone, sets it afire” (Isaiah 30:33).

Ahaz and Manasseh made children walk through this fire as offerings to the God Moloch. “Moreover, he burned incense in the valley of Ben-hinnom and burned his sons in fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had driven out before the sons of Israel” (2 Chronicles 28:3). Because of this great sin, it was prophesied by Jeremiah that the place would be called the valley of slaughter,

“³¹They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind. ³²Therefore, behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when it will no longer be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of the Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth because there is no other place. ³³The dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky and for the beasts of the earth; and no one will frighten them away. ³⁴Then I will make to cease from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride; for the land will become a ruin” (Jeremiah 7:31-34).

Josiah put an end to the sacrifices when “he also defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire for Molech” (2 Kings 23:10). At the time of Jesus, the valley was used to burn rubbish from the city; its fires burning continually. It made sense that this place would become symbolic for abomination, judgment and hell.

The nature of that fear was a respect and reverence for the majesty and holiness of God. Perhaps no more memorable description is recorded that that in Isaiah,

“¹In the year of King Uzziah’s death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. ²Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one called out to another and said,

‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts,
The whole earth is full of His glory.’

⁴And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. ⁵Then I said,

‘Woe is me, for I am ruined!
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:1-5)

The insistence of Jesus that the disciples fear God was encouraged by remembering Whom it is that they were to fear. He was not only the God of judgment and wrath, the God that “has authority to cast into hell” (v.5), but He is a God that cares for us personally and intimately. Giving what might have seemed a ridiculous example, Jesus said, “are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God” (v. 6).

Again, the focus was on God's omniscience. He knew everything the disciples did, and He knew everything about them. Sparrows were common birds that were eaten by the poor. They were, naturally, inexpensive. The coin in question was an *assarion* which was worth one-sixteenth of a denarius (a denarius was an average day's wage for a common laborer). Even though these birds were very common and cheap, yet "not one of them is forgotten" (v. 6). Extending the illustration, Jesus said "indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (v. 7). The human head has some 100,000 hairs (those follicularly challenged notwithstanding). Such an example seems ridiculous, but the point is that the disciples were valued by God. "Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows" (v. 7).

Christ warns His disciples of the fear of man. Instead they are to fear God, "let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him" (Psalm 33:8). For us today, the most we shall have to endure is ridicule and mockery. Others have paid for their faith with their lives. Surely we cannot be so weak.

God Cares that We Honor Him

Then Jesus even more intently addressed His disciples saying, "I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God" (v. 8). Having focused on God the Father, Jesus now turned to the second member of the trinity. The idea meant by confessing in this context begins with mental assent or agreement. But it implied so much more than mere objective head knowledge. It was the personal testimony beautifully given by the psalmist,

"Come and hear, all who fear God,
And I will tell of what He has done for my soul" (Psalm 66:16).

Included in this idea was a lifestyle that is in agreement with what was confessed.

³⁴Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; ³⁶naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' ³⁷Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? ³⁸And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ³⁹When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' ⁴⁰The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'" (Matthew 25:34-40).

The reason is simple. If we do not confess Jesus, we deny the Father Who sent Him. As Jesus had just recently taught His disciples, "The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me." (Luke 10:16).

Self-denial and submission were the characteristics of the disciples who confessed Jesus, "²³And He was saying to them all, 'if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. ²⁴For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it'" (Luke 9:23-24). Jesus emphasized the reward for trusting and confessing Christ and contrasted it with the punishment for fearing man. He reminded His disciples that "he who

denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God” (v. 9). This is a clear way of stating that a determining factor in a person’s salvation is whether or not the confess Christ before men.

Confessing Christ is not something done on special occasions such as baptism. It is a daily, even hourly, way of walking. We have more opportunities to share our faith than we realize. Countless conversations could be turned to spiritual matters. Endless openings present themselves to interject our faith and our Savior into the moment. If the pattern of our life is to avoid these because we fear man, then we will be disowned and cast off. He will not plead for us, He will not be our advocate. Our pleas for mercy will go unanswered and our hopes of salvation be unfounded. “²²Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ ²³And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Matthew 7:22-23).

God Cares that We Repent

After extolling God the Father, and the Son He had sent, Jesus finished with warnings about denying the work of the Holy Spirit. “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him” (v. 10). At first this can seem striking. After all, so many sins are forgiven. Not just the usual sins that are every day a part of the lives of believers, but such sins as David’s adultery and murder, Peter’s denying Christ, and Saul’s persecution of Christians.

This really describes the sin of unbelief. To “blaspheme against the Holy Spirit” is to deny the Spirit’s testimony as to the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is to harden our heart against the truth. When a person has so hardened their heart that they ignore the prompting of the Holy Spirit, they are on the road to perdition. It is the deliberate rejection of the truth in light of clear manifestations of its reality. It is knowing in the head without committing in the heart. The person who is not forgiven is the person who never humbles himself to ask for forgiveness. Such behavior is precisely what Satan did.

There is no excuse for believers to be indifferent to this sin - it is gradual. It begins with grieving the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30), then resisting the Spirit (Acts 7:51), and eventually quenching the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). In warning believers of the perils of falling away from the faith, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews stated, “⁴for in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame” (Hebrews 6:4-6). He concluded later in the letter with the chilling admonition “for if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (Hebrews 10:26).

God Cares for Us

After such threats, Jesus ended on a positive note. “When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say” (v. 11). At first, it must have surprised, and probably frightened those disciples who listened closely enough to infer that this really meant that they were to be brought before “the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities.” Being brought before a judge or ruler of the synagogue was terrifying. It was

a day of limited civil rights and much arbitrary government. For the disciples, it was to be an increasingly ever-present danger.

Still, it was encouraging that Jesus told them not to worry, because in those moments of greatest need, “the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” (v. 12). Notice that Jesus did not say that they would not suffer persecution. He did not say that when brought before the leaders of the Jewish synagogue or a Roman official all would be well and they would go their merry way. What He said was that the Holy Spirit would be with them. That was what He promised His disciples, and that is the promise that hold true for us still today.

We must remember that to us “it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Philippians 1:29). The road is narrow and the way is difficult, but we go it not alone. We can say with David that

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for You are with me” (Psalm 23:4).

There is no greater indication that God cares for us that that.

Take Away

May God gives us the grace to live out our faith boldly in the knowledge of His great care for us.