

Pressure and Persecution

Luke 12:1-12

This morning we are making our way back to the book of Luke to continue our sermon series in which we've been looking at the life and ministry of Jesus to try to learn and grow as his disciples. We are at the beginning of chapter 12 which is right in the middle of a group of 4 chapters in which Luke records the things that happened in the late fall and early winter of Jesus' final year of ministry. These things take place in the region of Judea, about 6-8 months before he went to the cross, and Luke is the only one to record them.

Jesus had been mainly in the northern region of Galilee and the areas around it, but now he was beginning the long journey to the cross which brought him in and around Jerusalem more often. Jerusalem was a very dangerous place for him because it was the center of religion, and he was regularly speaking against and confronting the religious leaders. As he spent more time in that area the tension was building and they had already made it clear that they wanted to kill him.

You may remember at the end of chapter 11 we saw that the Pharisees accused him of getting his power from Satan and after responding to them he was invited into one of their homes where he proceeded to rebuke them strongly for their hypocrisy. So tensions were rising and that brings us to our passage for today. At the beginning of Luke 12 we're going to see a series of teachings that Jesus gave his disciples that had to do with how to stand firm under the pressure and persecution caused by the Pharisees. This was unique to their situation, but Jesus' teaching applies to us as well.

I'm sure we've all felt the increasing opposition to biblical Christianity around us and the pressure to conform to the immoral values and practices of our society. There's a growing likelihood that if we don't conform, we will be maligned and persecuted. I've seen a lot of pastors, churches, and Christians cave in to this pressure and I think it's important that we prepare ourselves to stand firm. There are a lot of passages where Jesus taught about these things, including the one we're looking at today. So I'm hoping we can glean some things that will strengthen and build us up. We're going to look at three teachings and I'm going to work through them one at a time.

Read Luke 12:1-3.

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. ² Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ³ Therefore 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.

One of the things that Jesus hated about the Pharisees was their hypocrisy. As I said before, he had just rebuked them for that very thing in chapter 11. They were displaying a form of righteousness on the outside by following the traditions of their fathers, but they were actually full of sin. They were also demanding things of others that they weren't willing to do themselves. So their hypocrisy wasn't just a personal matter, it was spreading throughout society.

Jesus told his disciples their hypocrisy was spreading like leaven. Leaven is like yeast. I found out online that it's old, fermented dough, usually containing lactobacillus (bacteria) and yeast. A little bit is added to a large quantity of flour and the living organisms in the leaven grow overnight, so that by morning the entire quantity of dough has been raised. Leon Morris writes: *"People tended to make their own bread and everyone would be familiar with the way a little leaven slowly transforms a large lump of dough. Leaven speaks of a penetration that is slow, insidious and constant."*

So, Jesus likened the hypocrisy of the Pharisees to leaven. Because of their influence on society, their hypocrisy was spreading through the community. People would practice a form of religion on the outside, but on the inside they'd be full of sin – full of slander, lies, deception, secrets. And it would be easy to get caught in the current and conform like everyone else, but Jesus warned his disciples to watch out for it and stand firm. He reminded them that there would be a day where all hypocrisy would be exposed and all hypocrites will be revealed for who they really are.

It's different in our society, but I can still feel a very definite wave of pressure to conform to sinful standards and be tolerant and even embrace what the Bible says is sinful. It used to be understood and accepted that Christians would hold a moral standard that's different than the rest of society, but that's not ok anymore. Now we're being accused of being intolerant, unloving, and even hateful if we do. And the pressure is coming from all kinds of places: media,

government, education, friends, family, and sadly even from churches and Christians.

I think Jesus would warn us to beware of the leaven in our culture – which in our case is the tolerance and celebration of sin. When Christ returns, the truth will be revealed and lies exposed. Isaiah 5:20 warns: *“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!”* Let’s not conform to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Let us stand firm in truth and hold fast to the teaching of Scripture.

The second teaching starts at verse 4...

Read Luke 12:4-7.

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ⁵ 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! ⁶ Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. ⁷ Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Here Jesus prepares them for the very real threat of persecution and death for following him. The Pharisees used fear to control people and keep them in line – fear of condemnation, public disgrace, social ostracization, penalty, punishment, and even death. This fear was very controlling and eventually led many people to turn away from Christ. His disciples would have to face that kind of fear. How would they overcome it? Jesus gives two answers.

He reminded them that there are greater consequences than being put to death. He speaks of being thrown into hell. The Reformation Study Bible points out that the Greek word is Gehenna, which is derived from Hebrew words meaning “valley of Hinnom,” which was located outside Jerusalem. Leon Morris says, *“In earlier days children had been offered there in sacrifice to the god Molech and the valley was regarded as accursed. In Jesus’ time the place was used as a rubbish tip and no doubt a fire was always burning there. It was a fitting symbol for the perpetual torment of hell.”*

Because of our sin and rejection of God, Scripture tells us we are storing up God's righteous wrath and have earned the punishment of eternal judgment in hell. This is infinitely worse than going through persecution and death. And the only way to be saved from it is Christ. Jesus is the only way and if his disciples would turn away from him out of fear of the persecution of the Pharisees, they would not be saved. Thus, Jesus tells them, don't fear those who can only kill the body, fear the one who has authority to cast into hell.

But fear is not the only motivator. Jesus also reminded his disciples of the love God had for them. He brought up that 5 sparrows were sold for two pennies – they're cheap. In Matthew 10:29 it says that two were sold for one. That means when you buy 5, you're actually getting one for free. They're cheap and of little value to us. But God remembers every sparrow, even the free ones – and as his children we are far more valuable than they are. The hairs of our heads are all numbered – God knows exactly what we're going through; he knows of our sufferings; he knows when we choose to face persecution rather than denying Christ. He cares deeply and we are very valuable to him.

So if someday we face persecution and even the threat of death we need to be armed with a healthy fear of God, but also the knowledge that he loves us deeply. It makes me think of C.S. Lewis' depiction of Christ as Aslan the lion – he's terrible to those who reject him, but those who follow him are deeply loved. Thus, the children in the story were willing to face terrible suffering and death because of him.

The third teaching...

Read Luke 12:8-12.

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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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."

This whole teaching would prepare his disciples for when they were brought in for questioning by the authorities. We see many examples of this later on in the book of Acts. Those situations would be intimidating and there would be a lot of pressure to disown Jesus when questioned. But what if the way they responded to him before earthly judges would be the way he would respond to them before heavenly ones? Jesus told his disciples that if they acknowledged him, he would acknowledge them. I think he's saying that when the angels were sent to pour out judgment, he would say: "leave them alone, they belong to me." But if they denied him, he would deny them.

Now immediately I think of Peter's denial. He denied he knew Jesus three times on the night Jesus was arrested. Does that mean Jesus will deny him when the angels come to judge the world? I don't think so. Peter was restored and went on to boldly proclaim the name of Jesus even when facing punishment and death. His moment of fear and denial didn't define or condemn him. God was merciful and forgave him of that and many other sins because of the sacrifice of Christ. And the remainder of Peter's life revealed that he was a faithful follower of Christ, willing to suffer and die for him. So I think this kind of denial is more than careless words in a moment of fear. I think it's an on going turning away and rejection of Christ.

And that's what I think Jesus is getting at in verse 10. Peter spoke against Jesus on the night he betrayed him. He did so out of fear. But he repented and was forgiven. But there's deeper level of denial that reveals a heart so hard that there won't ever be forgiveness. Jesus describes it as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The Reformation Study Bible says, "*Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit attributes to Satan the work of the Holy Spirit through Christ in the face of overwhelming moral evidence to the contrary. Such deliberate rejection of the truth is a decisive rejection of the One (the Holy Spirit) who can bring a person to repentance and faith; such sin makes forgiveness impossible.*" Forgiveness is impossible because the root of that sin is a total rejection of Christ. Leon Morris writes: "*It is this continuing attitude that is the ultimate sin. God's power to forgive is not abated. But this kind of sinner no longer has the capacity to repent and believe.*"

I think Jesus had in mind the people like the Pharisees who were watching his amazing miracles and witnessing the clear outpouring of the power of God, yet they were accusing him of wielding the power of Satan. They were so hardened that they were attributing to Satan the work that the Holy Spirit was clearly doing

through him. This blasphemy would not be forgiven because by it, they were demonstrating they would never repent.

Jesus finished his teaching by giving them comforting words about what would happen when they were brought in for questioning, if they would trust in him. He told them they wouldn't have to worry about what to say – the Holy Spirit would give it to them right then and there.

If you think of the powerful words Peter spoke when he was brought before the Jewish Council the first time – those words were given him by the Holy Spirit. Luke records in Acts 4:13 *“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished.”* Think of Stephen's speech before he was stoned, or Paul's speeches as he stood before powerful Roman Governors and Jewish Kings. They didn't prepare those words, the Holy Spirit gave them exactly what to say. And that's what Jesus was telling his disciples in Luke 12. He was preparing them for all the pressures and persecutions they would face.

In all of these teachings, we've seen the ways they were to prepare were to remember what would happen if they ultimately denied and rejected Christ. They would remain in their sins and under condemnation. On the day of judgment their sins would all be exposed and they would be found guilty. The angels of judgment would come and Jesus would not intervene and they would face eternity in hell.

But if they stood firm, even in the face of persecution and death, there would be forgiveness and salvation. The Holy Spirit would give them what to say. Jesus would claim them to be his own and they would enter into the eternal joy of the Father.

These are things we need to take to heart as we go on in this life and face increasing pressure, hostility, and persecution. Don't cave in! Stand firm! Christ will be with you, the Holy Spirit will give you what to say, God will see everything. And after you have suffered a little while you will be filled with overwhelming joy like never before as you receive salvation and our glorious inheritance.