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Luke 12:1–12

41st Message

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WHOM SHALL I FEAR?

SERIES: GOSPEL OF LUKE

The title of my sermon, “Whom Shall I Fear,” comes from Psalm 27, one of my favorite psalms. “*The LORD is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*” (Ps 27:1 ESV). As I thought about this verse living in the land of the affluent and free, I wondered how Christians living in other parts of the world where life is not so easy might embrace it. My friend and fellow pastor, Nerses Balabanian, was born in Aleppo, Syria. We meet monthly with three other pastors to refresh our souls by sharing personal psalms of lament and thanksgiving with one another. This week Nerses wrote,

O Mountains of Syria
 There is blood everywhere
 Brother against brother, sister against sister
 Sunni against Shiite
 Free Army against Government Army
 Islamist against Christians
 O LORD it is too complicated to comprehend
 How long this nonsense will continue?
 It is November
 The colors of the trees reminding the season
 All over I see orange, pumpkins and turkey
 IS it season of thanksgiving?
 Am I thankful to you O LORD?
 Can I be thankful when there is so much pain
 Yet, I want to thank you LORD in the midst of the pain
 Trusting in YOU, believing in your promises

Last week we examined Jesus’ denunciation of the hypocrisy practiced by the professionally pious and politically powerful men among the Pharisees. Jesus’ condemning remarks ignited the rage of his opponents, resulting in an escalation of their strategy in dealing with Jesus to one of entrapment and accusation. Though the air is still charged with hostility from Israel’s leadership, Jesus’ popularity continues to soar.

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.” (Luke 12:1 ESV)

The numbers seeking to hear Jesus swell into the tens of thousands and are in danger of “trampling one another.” While most charismatic leaders would be elated with such approval ratings and would harness the collective energy to serve their personal agendas, Jesus clearly sees the dangers. Riding a wave of popularity creates a euphoria that corrupts the heart quicker than anything else. As any rock star, athlete or congressman will tell you, the applause of a surging crowd is a like a drug. It elevates your sensibilities beyond reason, making you feel entitled, superior, and ultimately invincible. And once you taste it, you’ll do anything to maintain it, which makes you vulnerable to hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy means more than “pretense” and “play-acting.” In the Greek version of the Old Testament it refers to a “godless” person who cherishes anger in his heart and uses his persuasive powers to ensnare people for his malicious designs (Job 34:30; 36:13). Hypocrisy is a slippery slope. Like leaven it has the capacity to penetrate and permeate undetected until the whole loaf is leavened. No longer grounded in the love of God, we quickly compromise our integrity seeking the adulation of men, until all that is left is an ugly spiritual veneer.

To prevent his disciples from being contaminated by it, Jesus redirects their focus to the harsh realities that lay ahead of them on their journey. Like a good mountaineering guide, Jesus maps out the difficulty of the new terrain. The road to Jerusalem and beyond is going to get narrower, steeper and more dangerous, requiring extreme diligence and faithfulness to survive. At the end of the road there will be no crowds cheering them on, as all the powerbrokers will play every card in their hand to perfection. It will be evil’s finest hour and the disciples will need supernatural courage to stand. Rather than basking in the adulation of men, Jesus instructs his disciples how to confront their fears when evil reigns supreme.

I. God Sees All and Reveals All (Luke 12:2–3)

“Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 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.” (vv. 2–3)

To “cover up” (*synkalypō*) means “to keep something from being known by concealing it.” It is found in the Greek version of the Old Testament for concealing shame (Gen. 9:23), hatred (Prov. 26:26), or disguising oneself, as Saul attempted to do before the witch of Endor (1 Sam 28:8). The opposite of *synkalypō* (“covering up”) is *apokalypō* (“to uncover” or “reveal”). The disciples can be certain that whatever is concealed because of evil intent (“said in the dark”) will eventually be brought out into the light of day and fully exposed.

When something is “hidden” (*kryptos*) it is not known because it has been kept secret from others. These are the things whispered “in private rooms,” which refers to the inner rooms of a home that are strictly private with no windows. The term is used of an idol worshipper, who carves an image which he knows is “an abomination to the LORD...and sets it up in secret” (Deut 27:15); or of the wicked person who ambushes the innocent and murders him from his “hiding places” (Ps 10:8).

Man is capable of fooling himself with his depraved logic; “they say ‘The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive’” (Ps 94:7). But Jesus reminds us that the one “who formed the eye” (v. 9) sees everything, including “the thoughts of man” (v. 11). Therefore God will not only expose every malicious motive and dark deed by his light, but once exposed, he will broadcast them universally. As it is written,

**Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips
and harbors deceit in his heart;
when he speaks graciously, believe him not,
for there are seven abominations in his heart;
though his hatred be covered with deception,
his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.**
(Prov 26:24-26)

The thought of God exposing and broadcasting the evil of wicked is a comforting and sobering truth. It is comforting in that the disciples need not fear the insidious propaganda that will be hurled against them. Nor will they need to take on the burden of clearing their name, for that is God's responsibility. But it is also a sobering thought, in that they are not exempt from exposure and one day they may discover that their private life is going viral. For this reason they must be diligent to maintain their integrity at all times, for it is impossible to do battle with a guilty conscience (Ps 139:23-24). The second truth to help the disciples face their fear is that, regardless of what happens on earth, God has the final word.

II. God has the Last Word (Luke 12:4-5)

"[But] I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. 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!" (vv. 4-5)

Jesus addresses the disciples as "my friends" for the first time in the gospel. This dramatically shifts the tone of his teaching. The possessive "my" makes his affirmation all the more intimate, signifying that he is inviting them into the inner circle of his confidence by granting them divine secrets. As David writes, "The *friendship* (*sôd*—"confidential conversation," "circle of confidants") of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant" (Ps 25:14).

To prepare the disciples to stand firm in the face of martyrdom it is necessary to expand their horizons. Whenever a dictator, or government, or corporation, or terrorist has a monopoly on power, they evoke fear, if not terror. When Jesus completes his journey to Jerusalem, the disciples will get a full dose of terror unleashed. Israel's leadership will harness and manipulate every ounce of their authority and power in uniting an array of political and religious enemies to have Jesus falsely accused, tried in two courts and executed at the hands of their arch enemies, the Romans. Jesus will be crushed and tortured beyond recognition. And to the disciples horror, God will do nothing to intervene, except preserving his body for a holy burial.

But Jesus insists, "*once you're dead, what more can they do to you?*" His statement sounds like a sarcastic joke, but it forces us to think "outside the box" in new categories. His words, however cryptic, suggest to his friends that there is something more after death; so much more that, as final as death seems to us, it is insignificant by what follows (2 Cor 4:17; Rev 20:11-15). In verse five Jesus explains that death does not have the last word. Those who reign supreme on earth will one day be held accountable by a higher authority, who not only has the authority and power to kill, but also to cast one into hell.

"Hell" is "Gehenna," a reference to the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem.¹ When Ahaz became king over Israel he did the unthinkable; imitating the abominable practices used in the worship of Baal, he passed his son "through the fire" to Moloch as a sacrifice in this valley (2 Kgs 16:3; 21:6). Tragically the practice took root and

the sons of Judah continued "to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire," which God said "I did not command, nor did it come into my mind" (Jer 7:30-31). The practice of sacrificing children was such an abomination to God that Jeremiah prophesied that the Valley of Hinnom would become the place of God's judgment. The carnage will be so devastating, the valley will be renamed the Valley of Slaughter (Jer 17:32). In Jesus' day the valley served as Jerusalem's garbage dump, a place of perpetual burning and smoldering ash, an apt description of hell, where the condemned are consigned after the last judgment. The point is that there is a heavenly Judge who will have the last word on what we have done on earth. The slaughter of the innocents does not go unnoticed and will have divine repercussions. Even though disciples may follow in the footsteps of their master and endure severe persecution and martyrdom, God will vindicate them. Those who make their living by "might makes right" will indeed be cast into hell.

If I had been a disciple following Jesus' logic thus far, it would seem a bit unsatisfactory to me. Life is going to get tough. I am going to suffer and perhaps even die for my faith. But I'm not to fear because 1. God will expose the injustice done to me, and 2. He will cast one who murdered me into hell. That's it? What about me?

III. God's Care is Unceasing (Luke 12:6-7)

"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows." (vv. 6-7)

The harsh realities of fiery torment abruptly give way to idyllic images of God's tender and providential care. To reassure the disciples of God's concern for them, he highlights how God cares for the least of his creation. Five little sparrows cannot even bring ½ cent² apiece in the market place, and yet what are they worth to God? First, he conceived of them in his mind and then he designed them to fly and soar with effortless aerodynamics. He chose the color scheme of their feathers and inserted each one by hand. He gave them radar vision and imbedded them with intricate instincts—how to gather food, to reproduce and care for their young. He watches each and every one as they make their daily flights across the sky. And when one flies unwittingly into my plate-glass window with a thud and falls lifelessly to the ground, he knows. How much more does God care for you when you suffer persecution and even death?

The fact that "even the hairs on your head are numbered" magnifies the thought, as if God took the time and effort to implant each and every hair, one by one. So how much are you worth? When Israel felt abandoned in the exile, God passionately responded,

**"Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her
womb?**

**Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.**

**Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me."** (Isa. 49:14-16)

When we consider how God's infinite knowledge and providential care so far surpasses what we can comprehend, how can we begin to grasp the mystery of his redemptive design? As Joel Green remarks,

The point, then, is that sparrows can be bought and sold and humans can suffer persecution, but not apart from God's attentiveness, not

outside of God's care, not in a way that circumvents the redemptive plan of God."³

If we can live in the mystery of God's incomparable wisdom and trust him in his care, we can endure evil. And, as Jesus will make clear, persecution creates a holy stage that makes the presence of heaven exceedingly near.

IV. The Presence to Witness (Luke 12:8–10)

“And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. 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.” (vv. 8–10)

If being a disciple of Jesus does not grant us any kind of guarantee against danger or sorrow, persecution or death, what can we count on? To address that question Jesus expands our horizons so that we can see the intimate connection between heaven and earth and this age with the age to come. In the book of Job, Job had no idea his life had become a stage where a cosmic conflict was being acted out in full view of God, his angels and that vile accuser, Satan. Nor did he know that the rigorous and sometimes tortuous testimony he gave before his three so-called friends was being recorded in heaven. And nor did he dream that one day his unwavering passion for truth would end in a raging whirlwind of God's holy presence, where he would find his ultimate vindication, rest and transformation.

In like manner Jesus tells his disciples that they are the privileged players in the final chapters of God's redemption story. As they continue Jesus' work of liberation on earth, their testimony will not only be observed in the heaven, it will also be mirrored in the divine courtroom. Our confession of Christ before men stirs the Son of Man to confess our name before the angels in God's holy court. This suggests that during those moments of severe trial the veil between heaven and earth will be temporarily lifted so that realities of heaven may be tangibly felt by the one bearing testimony. After Stephen gave a courageous testimony about Christ to the rulers of the synagogue the Jews became enraged and ground their teeth at him and rushed upon him to stone him.

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:55–56)

It seems when God in his grace grants suffering saints visions of the heavenly court that their fear of death is utterly vanquished by their all-consuming love of God and Christ. As was the case for Stephen when his enemies came rushing upon him and stoned him.

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59–60)

Rather than seeing persecution as a threat to be avoided, Jesus encourages his disciples to see it as a divine opportunity to bear courageous witness to Jesus and the gospel message in full view of heaven. We should therefore consider it our highest honor and sacred duty to be summoned by God's holy court to bear testimony to his name, for we not only bring honor to God's name, we also enjoy commendation in the kingdom of heaven.

If we refuse to obey a summons to appear in a secular court, we are held in contempt of court and subject to a judge's sanctions for disrupting the court's legal process. Similarly if we fail to confess Jesus before men because of fear, shame or intimidation, we are denied Jesus' commendation before the angels of God. But denial is not the last word, for God's grace prevails and grants the prospect of forgiveness to the one who has denied him, a truth Peter came to treasure. Because of Jesus' vigorous prayers for him (22:31–32), Peter was fully restored as a faithful servant of the Lord. Jesus also prayed that those who crucified him would find forgiveness and thousands did (Acts 2:26, 41; 4:4).

But the window of opportunity will not go on indefinitely, for there is a point when a person must finally make a choice. Assurance of forgiveness does not extend to the one “who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit.” After Jesus cast a demon out of a deaf mute, some in the crowd accused Jesus of casting out demons by the prince of demons. Rather than being in league with the devil, Jesus was claiming to be bearer of the Holy Spirit whose power is liberating men and women from the power of the devil.

If you attribute the liberating work of the Spirit to the devil, you are in fact redefining good and evil and cutting yourself off from receiving the benefits of the work of the Spirit. As N. T. Wright illustrates, “Once you declare that the spring of fresh water is in fact polluted, you will never drink from it.”⁴

To commit this sin today would be to persistently refuse to heed the Holy Spirit's testimony about Jesus as seen in the Scriptures and confirmed by the transformation of individuals who faithfully draw on the liberating power of his Spirit. By so doing you are refusing the very gift of forgiveness itself.

V. The Power to Witness (Luke 12:11–12)

“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, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” (vv. 11–12)

Lest the disciples be fearful that they might fall away, Jesus assures them that the Holy Spirit will be with them and will inspire them to give a courageous testimony before those who may intimidate, abuse or even kill them. This verse sets the groundwork for the powerful speeches of Peter (Acts 4:5–12; 5:27–32), Stephen (6:8–15; 7:2–60;) and Paul (23:1–10; 26:2–23) in the book of Acts.

We must never forget that the gift of the Holy Spirit is God's final testimony and plea to the nations to come home to Jesus. This makes our role as witnesses crucial to the salvation of the world. In the mystery of God's redemptive plan it seems that our testimony carries the greatest weight when we appear utterly powerless, broken, and weak before the world.

One of the most challenging voices of the last century who bear witness to Christ in face of persecution was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. John Conway, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of British Columbia, in a paper entitled “Bonhoeffer's Last Writings from Prison,” brilliantly captures the truths that Bonhoeffer wrestled with living through the unspeakable horror of the Nazi regime.⁵ (What follows are excerpts from Conway's paper, used by permission).

During his final days in his bleak underground prison in the cellars of the Gestapo headquarters in central Berlin he was grappling with the cumulative and appalling suffering of so many men, women and children. From his contacts with the anti-Nazi resistance, he

had learnt of the dreadful crimes committed by his countrymen against millions of Jews, Poles, Russians, gypsies and the mentally handicapped. “Where is God in all this? Why doesn’t he intervene to put a stop to it?”

It was just at this critical juncture that Bonhoeffer heard the news that the planned assassination of Hitler had failed. His preoccupation with suffering and death became more forceful. The imagery and significance of Christ’s crucifixion became ever more real. Out of this came his shortest but perhaps most memorable poem, “Christians and Others:”

All men go to God in their distress,
seek help and pray for bread and happiness,
deliverance from pain, guilt and death,
All men do,
Christians and others

The first verse reflects the universal human desire for relief, for removal of the pain, for cessation of the suffering, for deliverance from death. This makes their religion a form of spiritual pharmacy. But all too often these prayers are not answered. By 1944 the mass murders seemed unstoppable. Christ was being tortured and crucified anew on Nazi Golgothas. Why did not God respond to such heartfelt petitions, but instead seemingly remained silent? The second verse tells us:

All men go to God in His distress
find Him poor, reviled,
without shelter or bread,
watch Him tormented by sin,
weakness and death.
Christians stand by God in His hour of grieving

Bonhoeffer’s answer was, “God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and this is exactly the way, the only way in which he can be with us and help. Matthew 8:17 [“This is to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, He took our infirmities and bore our diseases”] makes it crystal clear that Christ helps us not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.

But God has not withdrawn into a remote impassivity. Rather, God suffers alongside his creation. God suffers too. To be a Christian is to stand by Christ in his hour of grieving, on the cross, in jail, in the bombed-out streets and concentration camps. This is a reversal of what religious man expects of God.”

Instead says Bonhoeffer, “Man is summoned to participate in God’s suffering at the hands of a godless world. This is what makes a Christian what he is.” It is not church practices, religious activity, or creedal conformity that makes a person a Christian, but identification with God’s suffering in the world.

This is what distinguishes Christians from others. Jesus asked in Gethsemane, “Could you not watch with me one hour?” This is a reversal of what the religious man expects of God. Instead, man is summoned to share in God’s suffering at the hands of a godless world.

But where shall we find the strength and the grace to become such disciples? The third verse of the poem boldly asserts that, despite the sins we have all committed, despite the barriers we have all

erected, despite all our efforts to behave like others, religiously, nevertheless

God goes to all men in their distress,
satisfies body and soul with His bread,
dies, crucified for all,
Christians and others,
and both alike forgiving.

God does not come to men and women, as they would so often wish, to remove their pain and sufferings. Only in the messianic age will every tear be wiped away. Instead in the sacrament of the last supper, by sharing with us his Body and his Blood, he has given us the power to share in his pain and suffering. Until then, Christ grants to his followers, through his Eucharist, the power to stand with him, as he suffers at the hands of a hostile world. And as we do, we will realize an even greater truth. Despite all that we, men and women, have inflicted on our Christ, he looks down on us from the Cross and

dies crucified for all
Christians and others
and both alike forgiving.

On April 7th 1945 he and a group of other prisoners, celebrated the Sunday after Easter with a short service. Bonhoeffer read the set texts: Isaiah 53:5 “With his wounds we are healed”, and 1 Peter 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

But then two guards arrived to summon him to leave. There was only time to ask Captain Best, if he survived, to take a short message to England, and to remember him to his ecumenical partner and friend, Bishop George Bell of Chichester: “Tell him that for me this is the end but also the beginning—with him I believe in the principle of our Universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national interests, and that our victory is certain.”

He was then taken back to the notorious concentration camp Flossenbürg, where on the same night he was to be arraigned, convicted, condemned to death, and in the gray dawn of the following morning, April 9th, executed by hanging.

At his memorial service on July 27 the gospel lesson was taken from Matthew 10:17-42, the parallel passage to Luke 12:1-12.

1. “The word gehenna...is the Greek form of the Aramaic gēhinnām, which in turn goes back to the Hebrew gē-hinnōn (“Valley of Hinnom”).” H. Bietenhard, “Gehenna, hell” NIDNTT, 208.

2. “A penny (assarion) is a small coin whose value is measured as one sixteenth of a denarius.” Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 483.

3. Ibid

4. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 149-150.

5. John S. Conway, “Bonhoeffer’s Last Writings from Prison,” Association of Contemporary Church Historians, February 2006 – Vol. XII: Special Issue on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/akz/akz2602sp.htm>.