

Luke 12:4-12

Misplaced Fears

We are turning to Luke 12 today.

As we work slowly through Luke's gospel and will probably be in this book for many more months, it's important to remember that everything that takes place after the end of Luke 9 takes place on the way to the cross. The cross is in view, Jesus and the disciples are headed to Jerusalem. The three years of ministry that Jesus has had with his disciples are drawing to a close.

So much of what He is saying is to prepare them for life after Jerusalem.

I had a friend a couple of years ago who was diagnosed with terminal cancer, right around my age. And he had some time before he left, so he shot a number of youtube videos to leave for his kids and others. And those videos stand as the record of the things that were most important for his kids to know. There was no time in those videos for meaningless or light chatter, these were the most important thoughts for a dad to leave for his kids.

And Jesus here in his last weeks before the cross is leaving his disciples with what they need to know for after He is gone, because that time will be coming soon.

And he has just warned them against hypocrisy, the leaven of the Pharisees. And we get the meaning that Jesus doesn't want his followers to be religious hypocrites.

But to set the disciples apart from the Pharisees would have put them at odds with the religious, social, and political leaders in their jewish community. Jesus was now creating a situation where they would not fit in the world they grew up in. And we know from history that almost all of these disciples were killed for their faith. Even Luke, who wrote this book, was probably hanged from an olive tree in Greece for his faith.

Jesus was preparing them, not for a life of making cool churches that convinced their communities to like them, but for a life of clinging to Jesus and His teachings and His values in a world that wanted nothing to do with them.

They weren't going to be Christians who went along with the culture and moved with the winds of culture to be able to offend the fewest people. They weren't going to be a weird Christian sub-culture that was always trying to do a clean version of everything the culture did, only 20% worse. They weren't being prepared to be cool and attractive.

But they were being prepared to be part of a true counter-culture. Not one that goes to war with the culture by violence, but one whose God is different, worldview is different, way of life and way of thinking is different. People who are kind to their neighbors, who would give their lives for the good of people who can't stand what they believe, but who would be unique and never really fit here.

But because they were not going to withdraw from the world but were going to really be part of it, they would be hated, they would be mocked, they would be shunned, and some would be killed. And they would keep singing and rejoicing and living and serving neighbors and not feeling like something had gone wrong. They weren't going to be concerned about being on the wrong side of history, about being thought poorly of. They were going to be faithful to Jesus.

And we have had many years in our country of broad acceptance of many Christian values. (We've never been a nation that accepts all Christian values, but you could live as a faithful Christian and still feel very much included in society and its institutions.) Those days are drawing to a close.

And for many of us, that causes some fear. Because, of course, we'd rather have smooth sailing. We'd rather have acceptance from the culture. We don't want tensions, we don't want exclusion, we don't want to lose opportunities because of our faith. We want to have our Jesus and our acceptance, too. So how do we go forward as faithful Christians, Christians who sense that the world is not our home? Who, as followers of Jesus, don't have a good place to lay our heads here?

The scriptures are very relevant for us, as usual:

Luke 12:4 "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more."

Jesus says something He felt the need to say often to his disciples: DO NOT BE AFRAID.

In the Old Testament and New Testament, God repeats to His people, over and over again, do not be afraid.

God's will is that those who know Him would be marked by courage and would not be fearful and timid.

And to just so we can feel the weight of this: this is a command of God.

We feel the weight of it when God says not to lie, not to commit adultery. We would feel guilty for breaking those commands. And here the command from Jesus is "DO NOT BE AFRAID."

And to make it as weighty as we're supposed to, listen to this in Revelation 21:8 - this is a judgment scene. God is sending people off to their eternal condemnation, people who don't believe and haven't been redeemed are marked by certain sins:

Revelation 21:8 "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

The cowardly are at the top of the list.

So Gospel belief is supposed to produce in us a growing measure of courage and is supposed to cast out fear.

Now we might think that Jesus is trying to keep us from being nervous people who fear the little things. Which, He is - we're not supposed to have a fearful view of the world. But He says something much bigger here:

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body

Now if I were handing out commands, I'd say, "Don't fear the stuff that can't kill you. If it can't kill you it will only make you stronger."

But that's not what Jesus says. He says don't be afraid of those who *can* kill you. Which, of course, seems irrational. But look what He says:

Luke 12:4 “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more.

Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid of those who can do no more than kill you.”

Remember, he is preparing his followers to live in a world that will reject them. And he says to them (and to us) that one key to that is to not be afraid of anybody if the worst they can do is kill you.

Think of the worldview this implies.

These disciples were going to be sent to do a tremendous amount of good in this life. But to do a ton of good in this life, they were going to have to be oriented on the next life.

They were going to have to really believe that death is not the end. They were going to have to believe that the utter rejection they would receive from everyone around them, up to the point of losing their lives, wasn’t the end of the story. They would have to believe that life goes on eternally, and that the next life is infinitely longer and more important than this life.

They would have to believe that all the people can do to them here: the loss of comfort, the loss of their place in society, the loss of influence, the loss of jobs and wealth, and even the loss of life is not to be feared because it is all exceptionally fleeting.

And if we are going to be faithful to Jesus, we need to believe this too. We need to believe that if we have been redeemed by Christ, we will rise with Christ and reign with Christ. And as much as we’ll feel the losses here, once we’ve lost it all here, we won’t lose more.

You’d have to really believe the Christian story to live this fearlessly.

You’d have to really believe in heaven. You’d have to really believe that the rewards for faithfulness aren’t necessarily here. You’d have to totally reject the prosperity gospel, which is the a pseudo-Christian version of Karma, that says that if you’re faithful here you’ll be blessed financially and in in your health and relationships here.

Jesus doesn’t say, “Don’t fear those people, because eventually you’ll win out over them here.” He says, “Don’t fear them, because the worst they can do is kill you.”

Which means there must be something worse than losing this life.

So let's pause and take that in for a second.

There is something worse than losing this life.

Which means that Jesus is teaching that after this life, things could get worse.

Luke 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.

He says there is One who has the authority to take from you far more than this life, but who has authority to render a judgment on you to send you to hell.

You really can't read the Gospels and say that Jesus didn't believe in hell. Jesus in this passage and in about a dozen others calls hell a reality.

And he tells the disciples not to fear their death, but to fear that instead.

He knows what kinds of deaths his disciples would die: crucified upside down like Peter, crucified on an X shaped cross like Andrew, drawn and quartered. And he says, "Don't fear that - that's nothing compared to hell."

Which is another reason we know that hell is eternal. If people are just annihilated in hell - tossed in and then extinguished, then he couldn't say that these deaths weren't as bad as hell.

Now this doesn't mean that every popular conception of what hell is like must be true. We have the cartoon versions where satan is a sarcastic guy with horns and a pitchfork who runs the joint and keeps it miserable. He hangs out by the fire, playing AC/DC songs backwards, and annoys everybody.

Popular conceptions aren't all right.

So what is it like?

I don't think we fully know. But Jesus uses the word Gehenna here - It's Ge Hinnom - the valley of Hinnom - which was a literal place, a valley on the southwest of Jerusalem. And

some people have said that it was the garbage dump and people brought their garbage there, and it was always burning, so the smoke going up forever was just a description of the garbage dump. And Jesus is saying here that our lives without God become wasted, sent to the garbage dump.

But it doesn't seem there's much evidence for that - there's none in archaeology (and they've dug a lot in this area), and there's no evidence for it in the bible, and nobody claimed that in history until 1200 AD. So it's more than a stretch to say that Jesus has a garbage dump in mind when he says these things.

But we do see this valley mentioned in the Bible as a far worse place than a burning trash dump. During the Old Testament times, there were long seasons when the Israelites became as evil as you could imagine - they started worshipping the gods of the nations around them and following the pagan rites. And this is God's assessment in Jeremiah 7:

Jeremiah 7 30 "For the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, declares the LORD. They have set their detestable things in the house that is called by my name, to defile it. 31 And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom (the valley of Hinnom - Gehenna) , to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind. 32 Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. 33 And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away.

The people had turned away from God, and in this Valley of Hinnom - in Gehenna - they burned their sons and their daughters. There was a god that they worshipped that demanded human sacrifice, and their children were sacrificed to this god.

And as a result, God would judge them, and the place of judgment where God paid them back for their sins would be in this valley.

So Genehenna was a place where God judged sin severely, it was outside of Jerusalem, symbolically outside of the blessings of God. It was a place of divine judgement for where evil was done, and where God paid them back for their evil.

So it's real, it's awful.

So is it the fire that Jesus described elsewhere?

Doesn't he mean something else with it?

Maybe it's symbolic. Maybe he's speaking in metaphors. But if his words here are just a metaphor, then they are used to describe some reality that is so bad that it is indescribable.

Symbols represent something bigger than the symbol:

Your wedding ring represents something bigger: your marriage. Our flag represents something bigger than a flag, our nation. And if Jesus is using symbolic words here to describe hell, he is describing something bigger - worse - than his words.

Nobody in hell would say that Jesus exaggerated and it's not all that bad. Nobody is there saying, "Jesus described it as fire, but it's nowhere near that bad - it's actually kind of like Avon - It's tolerable, but you don't really want to be there, and kinda wish you hadn't ended up there - but 'fire' is overboard."

So whether his words are symbolic or not makes very little difference. He is describing a horrible reality.

But is this just?

A big question this brings up almost anytime you talk to a thoughtful nonbeliever in the west is, "How could a loving God send someone to hell?"

Because it does sound extreme.

It just doesn't seem to fit at all with our conception of a God who is loving, and kind, and just, and fair.

We have to realize that this objection to Christianity is shaped in large part by our culture.

Christianity is not the product of any one culture, it's not just a western american-european religion – it is the transcendent, always true everywhere truth of God. So when you hold Christianity over any culture, there will be some parts that fit really well with that culture and some parts that culture objects to.

For example, here, the idea that God is love and gave himself for us – that's not really offensive. If you tell someone God loves them they usually don't get mad at that. (Of course he loves me, I'm awesome.) But they do get mad at hell.

But if you go to a traditional muslim culture – they're not offended at all at a God who sends people to hell. OF COURSE HE DOES! Because they believe in justice and the enemies of god should suffer.

But you tell them that God the Son let people kill him and taught them to forgive – and they say, “NO – NEVER! That's blasphemy! God must have his honor!”

So part of the objection against hell is cultural.

But the other part is that we have explained it poorly.

There is a degree to which people in hell have chosen it.

Not that they said, “Yay, throw me in.”

But they did, in their lifetimes, say they wanted to exist without God.

We won't turn there now in the interest of time, but in Romans 1:19-24, there's a process described where God reveals Himself to people in the world He made, people say “I refuse to give thanks or acknowledge you as God”, and so God “gives them over” to what they want.

So God shows they need to seek him, they substitute him, so he says, “you can have what you want” and what they want that is not God never has good consequences.

And the way it normally works is, we will go through our lives, hear the Gospel, and say, “I don't want Jesus” - either by ignoring him, or putting it off, or outright rejecting it.

God, meanwhile, without them realizing it's Him, showers them with blessings to show his goodness: the sunrise, the blue skies, the health of their family, anything good in their hearts, anything good they do, the fact that people are good to them, the fact that they can be pain free – it is all given to them by Jesus. And was all paid for by the death of Jesus so that even giving those gifts could be just.

But they choose not to have Jesus. And then they die. But human life goes on forever.

And then God says to them, “You have chosen not to have me in your life. Well, your life goes on forever. So “have it your way.”

And he gives them a God-free existence for all eternity. An existence where all the blessings that were purchased by God are gone – so now there is only sorrow, and nobody doing any good for anyone, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth. When God is removed from a life that goes on forever, it is only bad all the time.

C.S. Lewis said it well, *“There are only two kinds of people – those who say, “Thy will be done” to God, or those to whom God in the end says, “Thy will be done.” All that are in hell choose it. Without that self-choice it wouldn't be hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it.”*

Hell is the direction you chose projected into eternity.

Now that’s all a good explanation, but it is partial. Hell isn’t only our reaping what we sow, it is divine wrath. It is punishment from God, not just the natural consequences of us going on forever and us choosing not to follow God.

And no matter how much I try to massage the truth in my head, there are parts of it that don’t seem fair. But, like we always do when we try to grasp the mind of God, we just have to trust that he is just and is fair and all that he does is right. I don’t have the ability to discern what is just and fair by divine standards.

And, I think, when we can see clearly on the other side of death, we’ll see how all that God does is just. So when we wonder about departed loved ones who didn’t seem to know the Lord, it is a comfort to know we didn’t know their hearts or what went on in their last moments of life. And it is a huge comfort to know God is totally good, and in eternity, nobody will say that God was at all unjust, or cruel, or anything short of perfect.

And in this life, this doctrine is supposed to be a reminder that losing this life isn’t the worst thing. And as scary as these truths are supposed to be, they are told to us here to drive out other fears.

Luke 12:5 again: **“Luke 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.”**

He says to fear the Lord.

Be more concerned with what God thinks of you than what the people who are rejecting you think about you.

Be more concerned with offending God than offending the culture.

Be more concerned with God's displeasure than the displeasure of a twitter mob, the displeasure of a boss, the displeasure of a parent, the displeasure of the cool kids in school. Fear God who has far more power over you than they do.

"The remarkable thing about God is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else."

– Oswald Chambers

Worst case scenario for us is not the loss of political power, or the loss of status in the world, the loss of freedom, the loss of health, or even the loss of life.

And it helps us in this life to remind ourselves that even if our worst fears come true, they are not the worst case scenario. And the losses are not forever.

Which doesn't mean we don't care about how things go in this world. We want to contribute toward a better society, toward a better life for our kids and neighbors. But we actually attend to those things better when those things aren't ultimate. We do better work in loving our neighbors when we fear nothing but God.

Because then we can keep doing it with joy.

Take, for example, Christians and political engagement. Christians can get involved in politics as a way of loving neighbors - voting for just laws and leaders with integrity and a biblical sense of justice is a good way to love neighbors by building a better society.

But if politics become ultimate, we fear our candidates losing so much that we act out of anger, we are so fearful of losing money or power or some of the good things we enjoy in this world that we engage with people like this is the ultimate war that we have to be fighting.

But if Jesus is ultimate and we fear the loss of his approval more than anything else, then we can engage in politics even better - we won't be extremists, we can have rational dialogue and debate, we won't be hostile, and we can work hard for what we believe and then sleep like God is in control and the future we have with him is sure. It actually makes us better at politics.

We love everything we do *better* when we love it less than God.

And to help us overcome our fear of losses, in an effort to help us obey the command, "Do not fear," Jesus tells us to fear only what's ultimate, and nothing in this world is ultimate.

Jesus goes on now, to help us not fear, and calls us to remember His care:

6 Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. 7 Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

So Jesus shifts to God's care. And he reminds us that even sparrows are cared for by God. Sparrows are not exotic birds, they are relatively featureless, plentiful birds. The mice of the sky. But God's eye is on each one.

And if His eye is on the sparrow, then certainly His eye is on us.

One of the sources of fear in this world is the fear of being alone - of losing everybody. Of being excluded, of never being a cool kid, never being considered for a promotion, never being invited, never being thought of.

Jesus says, "Don't be afraid of that. God cares for you. And if you doubt that, look at how he cares for sparrows - do you really think he'll remember them and forget you?"

And he talks about the detailed level of concern God has for us: *even the hairs of your head are all numbered*. You can insert the bald pastor joke of your choosing here. But Jesus's point is that God fully knows you, fully cares for you, so losing the care and concern of your fellow people isn't the ultimate concern.

So when you have to choose: God's acceptance or their acceptance, go with God's:

8 “I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. 9 But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God.

There is a real temptation to disown Jesus. Or to acknowledge Jesus privately or with a church community, but refuse to acknowledge Him at work or out where it could cost you something.

But Jesus teaches that faith that is only private is not faith at all.

To accept Jesus is to accept His lordship over all of life, not just the secret parts. We exercise our faith in every sphere of life - as Abraham Kuyper said:

“there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'”

Every bit is His, and if our faith is only private and only for church, it isn't real faith.

Romans 10 says the same:

Romans 10:9 “because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

True faith in Jesus comes with a public proclamation of faith.

And when we want to not acknowledge Him before people who don't believe, it is revealing who we fear most. We fear most those who can take our jobs or status or comforts, and don't fear the Lord.

So Jesus calls us to acknowledge Him publicly.

10 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.

If we do fear the Lord, this is a scary verse. And so many have come wondering if they've committed this unpardonable sin. What is this blasphemy of the Holy Spirit?

In context here, Luke 11:15 sets all of this up - Jesus had cast out a demon and healed a mute man:

Luke 11:15 “But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons,”

So the Pharisees, on whom Jesus had pronounced many woes, see the clear work of God done in Jesus and attribute it to Satan. In Matthew 12, we won't turn there now, the connection between these events is even more clear.

It seems that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is witnessing the clear works of Jesus and attributing them to Satan. At that point, your heart is as hard as Pharaoh's and you just wouldn't turn to Jesus by faith to be forgiven.

And Jesus warns about this for a reason: we could deny that the works of Jesus are the works of Jesus: His work in the church, His work in giving us scripture, His work on the cross and His offer of grace. And if we deny all of his offers of grace to us and attribute them to Satan, we can reach a point of hardness of heart where we wouldn't consider those offers anymore.

So it's a warning, but also a bit of a comfort to people with a tender conscience who fear, “Oh no, have I done this?” If you care about this at all, you haven't done this. To still have a tender conscience is to show you haven't hardened your heart against Jesus and His works and effects. And Jesus's promise stands for everyone: come to me and I will give you rest.

One last encouragement in this passage for life in a world that rejects us:

11 “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, 12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”

I've heard pastors use this verse to justify not preparing their sermons and studying ahead of time. Which actually shows they need to study more- because this is not a verse that is against study and preparation.

It's another encouragement not to worry (verse 11). You'll be falsely accused, rejected, asked to give an account for your faith, but know that the Holy Spirit goes with you, the Spirit gives you words to say, the Spirit is with you.

So don't fear. Don't worry.

Luke 12:4-12
Misplaced Fears

In this passage, Jesus calls his followers not to be afraid of the things everyone else is afraid of. The life he calls us to requires constant courage. But this doesn't mean a life with no fear, but that our fears are well-placed.

I. Do Not Fear (Luke 12:4)

Notice that Jesus calls us not to fear some things that we might assume would be OK to fear. What are those things? How can the Christian faith so change us that even these natural fears are gone?

II. Fear Him (Luke 12:5)

Jesus calls us to fear God instead of people. What does this look like?

III. Do Not Fear (Luke 12:6-7)

Fear should not be the only emotion characterizing our relationship with God. In this same passage Jesus calls us to trust His care. How are those ideas related?

IV. Fear Him (Luke 12:8-10)

To deny God and fail to acknowledge Him and what He has done is a serious sin. Why does He care about this?

V. Do Not Fear (Luke 12:11)

Jesus calls us here not to fear that we won't be able to give a good answer for our faith. How does this line up with the call to study and prepare?