

About a decade ago, I was invited to a Cowboys game and quickly accepted because of their opponent that day. As some of you know, I am originally from the Chicagoland area and, while I have lived in Dallas longer than any other place in my life, my sports loyalties still reside in my hometown...much to the consternation of my wife. And wouldn't you know it. The Cowboys were playing the Bears. But I had a big decision to make. Would I keep my rooting interest to myself, or would I proudly display my loyalty and take whatever consequences came my way? Well, I decided to go big. I put on my Bears hat, Bears shirt, and Bears volume. When I got to my seat, I got a few groans, a few laughs, a few sneers, and there was some fun ribbing back and forth as the game went on. That was, until the end, when the Bears were victorious. For some reason, everyone lost their sense of humor! The walk back to the car was a parade of dirty looks and a few choice phrases not fit for church. It was a glorious day, but I did pay the price of not being very popular and running the risk of someone taking it too far.

It takes a lot of courage to put yourself in a crowd of those opposed to what you represent. Our desire for the approval of others and the avoidance of any harm can cause us to remain quiet or retreat with what we think, believe, etc. That is most true about our faith in Jesus Christ. In the last 20 or so years, the Christian faith has fallen more and more out of the mainstream. The public's/culture's view of the Church, Christians, and the Bible have all taken a hit and though we are still technically in the Bible Belt here in Texas, the post-Christian world has arrived, and we may find ourselves more and more on the margins.

As evidence, a recent survey showed that 55% of unbelievers think Christians are hypocritical, 54% believe they are judgmental, and 50% said they are self-righteous. Only 15% think Christians are compassionate and only 11% think Christians are honest. In another poll, the pastor now finds himself near the bottom of the list of trusted public officials, and a recent Pew poll suggests less than half the country will identify itself as Christian in the next couple of decades. This not only reminds us of the work we have to do, but it is also a sobering reality check that shows our growing outsider status.

This is more than an image problem. Yes, in some ways it's self-induced. We can be our own worst enemy. But this goes beyond that. It's a difference of world view, belief, and allegiance. We believe in a perfect creator God who made us in his image and for relationship with him and demanded perfection. When we fell short, we separated ourselves from him, broke the world, and could do nothing on our own to fix it. But God could and did when he sent his Son Jesus to take on flesh, die on a cross to pay for our sins, and be raised in victory three days later, and we are made right when we put our faith in him. Our worship of Jesus and devotion to his Word causes us to live differently and in contrast to the way of the world, and our message that tells people they have a need only God can satisfy is offensive. The cross is foolish to those who don't believe, and Jesus said we would be hated for it. So when we realize the public confession and living out of our faith could make us hated, unpopular, at risk, our reflex can be to pull back, go silent, or go along to get along. And we thwart the purpose for which we were created and saved.

So when those times come, how can we press forward, no matter the consequences? How does God show up when we do? If the cost of discipleship is enmity with the world, how do we know it's worth it? This morning, Jesus is going to challenge us to go public with our faith, but as he does, he's going to show us how God is faithful when we do.

Be true. God knows. Jesus starts by demanding we live with integrity around our faith.

[Luke 11:53-12:3] ⁵³ As he went away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, ⁵⁴ lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say. ¹ 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.

The setting of this passage is fascinating. The second half of Luke 11 is Jesus ripping the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. He calls them fools and says they are full of evil. I don't think that makes the list of how to win friends and influence people. They are angry, hostile, and plotting to do him harm. Conversely, though, he is growing in popularity. The crowd is now so large that people are walking over each other. Not all are coming for the Messiah. They just want to see something cool. The Gospel writers often differentiate between the crowd and true disciples, though the crowd does include genuine seekers. So Jesus and his followers find themselves in the tension of hostility and harm and popularity. Both can derail our witness and public faith. Why?

We don't want to lose face with the world, and we don't want to get our face bashed in by the world. We all want to be liked and we don't want to be hurt. But following Jesus puts that at risk, so we may be tempted to live a double life. Jesus calls it hypocrisy. He uses a word meaning actor, that we play a part that is not truly us, all in the interest of self-preservation. People knowing we are Jesus-followers can cost us too much, so we act like something we are not. We keep our beliefs to ourselves, don't speak up in spiritual conversations, agree with things we don't agree with, virtue signal about things we don't believe in, click the Like button on stuff opposed to God's Word, participate in activities we shouldn't.

As you think about the different circles you run in, consider if they are getting the true you. Are you hedging? Playing a part? **Integrity is often defined as how you act when no one is looking. But, with regards to our faith, integrity is how we act when everyone is looking.** Jesus starts this conversation by giving us a warning that it is not going unnoticed. God has been collecting our data long before social media companies did. He sees all and knows all. He doesn't want to make us paranoid. He's challenging us to honor God and stop pretending. He also wants to reassure us. He knows why we do it, and he wants to help. That's what he addresses next.

Don't fear. God cares. We are not alone when the world takes issue with what we believe and whom we follow.

[Luke 12:4-12:7] ⁴ “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.

Some say fear is the strongest and most powerful emotion, that we will obey it above all others. Whether or not that's true, Jesus knows how influential it can be. He connects our hypocrisy to the fear of man, that we keep our faith hidden because we are afraid of what man might do to us. As he does, he's basically asking "What's the worst they could do to you?" He concludes that it is taking our lives. He doesn't say that flippantly, nor does he take it lightly, and we must recognize the risk is real and we may face it one day.

But even if we are never killed for our faith, it can still come at a significant cost. We die a death socially and relationally. Those closest to us can cut us off. We might get canceled, marginalized, left out. It might negatively impact our ability to get or keep a job, our income, or our grades. We may get accused of being close-minded, intolerant, hateful, misogynistic, phobic, arrogant, stupid. In my business career I once had a co-worker tell me I needed to do something unethical and immoral to close the deal. I said, "I'm not going to do that, and I want you to know I'm not going to do that because I'm a follower of Jesus Christ." And you know what he did? He laughed at me. Mockingly. And then said, sort of under his breath, "Well, ok. Good luck." I felt exposed in that moment. I started to worry if I made a mistake being that bold with my faith and wondered if I could be successful without cheating. Out of fear, I was tempted to pull back and play a part. You ever have a moment like that?

Jesus says we are focusing on the wrong thing when that happens because we are fearing the wrong person. He tells us to fear the one who can send us to hell! Now, that needs a little explanation. He uses the word Gehenna/Hell, the place of the dead, where the punished are judged. It's named after the Valley of Hinnom, southwest side of Jerusalem, where they burned trash, dead criminals, and where Jewish kings worshiped the God Baal. It's a despicable place, and God is the one who can put us there. Jesus is not saying God will put you there if you struggle with hypocrisy. He's telling us to fear the one who has control over your eternal life over any who may have control over this temporary life.

But as he warns us, he also encourages us with God's care and love for us. You are more important than sparrows. God knows you so intimately he knows the number of hairs on your head. I've made it easy on him. That doesn't mean we are guaranteed no pain and suffering in this life, and God may call you to martyrdom. **But if you are a follower of Jesus, your eternity is secure.** That means we can fearlessly live out our faith today knowing tomorrow and every tomorrow after are secure, and that means this life becomes expendable. We can give it all to the Lord. We don't have to hold anything back, play it safe, preserve ourselves. We can give it all to God and, if the worst thing happens and it comes at the cost of your life, you'll begin your eternal face-to-face relationship with Jesus.

So how can we tell who we are fearing? A few things to reflect on: Whose opinion do I value the most? Do you ever say, "If they knew I was a Christian..."? Are you actively hiding your faith in Christ from anyone? Do you have an inventory of things you'll lose if others find out? Maybe the best way to determine who you are fearing is to answer this question: **If being a Christian was a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you?** If you are a follower of Jesus

and no one around you can tell, there's a good chance you are fearing man and not God. So Jesus says **fear God for what he can do and trust him for what he will do.** If we do that, we can:

Go public. God provides. When you are faithful in your witness, God is faithful in return.

[Luke 11:53-12:3] ⁸“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.”

If you are a believer, the world needs what you have, and God has called and empowered his church to go and tell the good news of Jesus and bring others to saving faith in Christ. You can't do that if you keep your testimony to yourself. Romans 10:14 says “¹⁴ **How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?** God can do it all alone, but he wants to use you to make himself known.

So how will they respond? Some will reject it. I want to explain v10. Jesus says a word spoken against him can be forgiven but blaspheming the Spirit won't be. Jesus is saying many will reject him in his earthly ministry, in a moment of encounter. That is forgivable. Because, after he dies, rises, ascends, the Holy Spirit will be poured out on the Church, and it is ultimately the Spirit who testifies about Jesus and invites unbelievers into a saving relationship with Christ. If someone continues to reject that invitation until the day they die, they will not have received the gift of forgiveness and salvation, so they will not be forgiven and saved.

Others will reject and push back. I love that Jesus says “When you..” not “If you...” If you are public with your faith enough, you'll get resistance, but God will be with you all the way. You may get hostility. God will back up. You may get confusion. God will help you. You may get interest and a lot of questions. God will give you the words to say. The Holy Spirit will be with you in those moments. He will tell you what to say in response.

Too many of us keep quiet about Jesus because of the possible consequences. But we also keep quiet because we're afraid we'll look stupid or get asked a question we can't answer. So we don't speak. Guess what! You're not alone in those moments. The Holy Spirit is with you. I remember many times in my life having spiritual conversations with “Where did that come from?” Martha has a friend with whom she has had multiple spiritual conversations, and she never knew what to say because this girl was so far from the Lord and seemed like a lost cause. Martha would come home discouraged because she would just never feel like their conversations had any impact. That girl is a believer today. Not because of Martha's cleverness. But because God used a willing partner to make himself known, and he supplied all she needed to say to draw that girl to himself.

Is all that worth it? Yes! Jesus says he will acknowledge before the angels in heaven. You will be recognized in heaven by the one you recognize on earth. **There are eternal rewards for our faithfulness that far surpass the temporary rewards of staying quiet here.**

And it's worth it because God wants to use you to change the world and help populate the Kingdom. This is such an important reminder as we are weeks away from an election. Voting is important, so go vote. **But what we do in the secrecy of the ballot box is no substitute for what we do in the public proclamation of our faith.** Will it come at a cost? Probably. But it will be worth the cost as you spend eternity with the ones whom you led to Christ.

So I want to close with a story of faithfulness. 45 years ago today a small group of Christ-followers made a decision to gather and do two things. Love one another as Scripture calls for, and to make much of God through the preaching of his Word. They chose to do so in a relaxed atmosphere, have rock-n-roll church, and let people ask lots of questions. That group of people was the first gathering of a church known as Fellowship Dallas. So happy 45th birthday, Fellowship!

Today we commit to make much of Jesus, to preach his Word, and to tell others about him. We will do so honestly, because God is true, fearlessly, because God's got us, and publicly, because God will use us. While I pray for protection for all of us, our challenge is to be more and more like the early church in Acts 4. When the persecution started, they prayed for continued boldness in their witness. The world is dying. It's asking questions. It's looking for hope. We have it, and his name is Jesus. Don't keep him a secret. Go public and rest in the faithfulness of God.