

CAUTION AHEAD: *Fear and Denial*

Luke 12:1-12

"We are all beggars. This is true" Martin Luther

Introduction: There are certain things I want my kids to fear, and others I do not. I want them to be cautious when it comes to the pitfalls of driving, pressure from their friends, and being ruled by their emotions. However, I certainly do not want them to be afraid of trying something new, risking for the sake of the gospel, or looking foolish when no one else is willing to try.

We come to a section where Jesus tells His disciples to be **aware**, which carries the idea of both "be aware of" in your understanding and thinking", as well as "be wary to avoid" in your actions and conduct. This is such an important concept that Jesus devoted a whole discourse to it in Luke 12.

The reason it is so important is that the nature of the gospel, the nature of the response to the good news, is a change of not only my life toward sin and holiness, but a new orientation of loyalty. In other words, whatever system I was involved with before, I turn from that to a radically new one in following Christ. This is where we often fall short in our misunderstanding of the transformative nature of the gospel. We think it just affects our thinking, or our belief, or our something segmented out from the rest of life. That's why people think they can have and their former life, serve God and never change, and gain salvation and lose nothing. Jesus cautions us that this type of thinking is not only wrong, but destructive.

Be Aware of the System that Seeks to Control (12:1-3)

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.

This was a turning point in Jesus ministry. He had just been invited to have a meal with a Pharisee, where he levied a series of six woes that concluded with a pinnacle conclusion: they not only were excluded, but took away the key of knowledge from the people. This meant that they carried responsibility for leading their followers astray. From that point on, the Pharisee's went from inquisitive and cordial question asking to proactive provocation to try to catch Jesus in something He said that they could prosecute Him for (Luke 11:53-54).

After calling out their system and practice, a large crowd gathered around Him. He began a discourse that the crowd could hear, but clearly directed this conversation to His disciples. They not only needed to know what they were up against, but needed to be clear what following Him truly entailed. Over the next several weeks we will hear caution about our **treasure, heart, and readiness**. But the area that Jesus began with had to do with FEAR, something that plagues us all.

- **A Hypocritical System**

Jesus told His disciples to be aware of and avoid the **hypocrisy** of the Pharisee's. Typically when we think of hypocrisy, we think of someone who says one thing and does another, a fake, or one who hides behind a mask. We think of it in terms of individuals and can even assign motivation behind hypocrisy.

In other words, someone must know they are being fake but continues down a path anyway for some insidious reason.

But what Jesus is addressing here is not simply individual hypocrisy, but that of a whole system. The hallmark of this type of hypocrisy is that it offers hope to life's most important questions, (i.e. *why am I here, what is the purpose, is there a future, what happens when I die, how do I know*) but **cannot deliver**. In the case of Judaism in Jesus' day, they focused on keeping the rules *they created* to keep the Law God gave in order to be righteous, missing the whole point. Only Jesus could fulfill the Law, and only Jesus could be both just and the justifier of those who would believe (Rom. 3:26).

The other hallmark of a hypocritical system is that those within it **truly believe** they are right, or are really helping people. The Pharisee's, though not wanting to yield control or their place, still believed they were doing right by God (Rom. 10:2; Paul's own example in Philippians 3:2-6 and trying to wipe out the church itself – Acts 8:3). Undoubtedly there are those who have ulterior motives, but most truly believe they are right and are trying to help people.

- **A Hidden System**

But this system was not only described as hypocritical, but also as leaven, or yeast in bread. Yeast is an interesting ingredient, since it is almost tasteless and dissolves into whatever dough you are making. But it is also pervasive, spreading stealthily and completely through the mixture, affecting the whole. A religious system that says it has answers eternal questions but offers none is dangerous because it invades individuals, homes, churches, and cultures. This was true in Jesus day where you could not separate religious commitment from family, social activity, and even into government.

Today we see it both in **organized religion** such as *Islam, Mormonism, and even Catholicism*, where the system can control one's life, and breaking away from it would be detrimental. I talked last week to Matt Higby about the pervasive system of control in Japan, both of ancestor worship and an honor/shame based culture that keeps people away from seeing the need for love, Christ, and a God who cares. It is a system put into place to veil the minds and hearts of the well intentioned people *within* the system itself.

We also see it in **informal religion** such as what post-modernity has adopted in a form of **moral relativism**. What offers freedom to do whatever we deem right is really a system that enslaves a person in their own passions. We have a pervasive, insidious system all around us that values the life of an animal more highly than that of an unborn life, sexual freedom more than sanctity of marriage, and what someone *feels* about themselves is more important than the law written on their hearts (Rom. 2:15). It is this type of thinking that has become pervasive in our culture, systematically getting rid of God, His Word, absolutes, and any standard of objective reality. This creates tension and pressure for us. It is this type of system that Jesus cautioned His disciples to beware of.

- **A Temporary System (2-3)**

As pervasive as it is and as hidden as it becomes, it will not stay hidden. All things **will be revealed one day**, both motives and application. The system will be exposed along with its shortcomings and downfalls. There will come a day when the light will expose not only the individual intentions of our hearts, but the systems that are in place to blind our eyes to the truth of Jesus.

1 Corinthians 4:5. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who **will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness** and will disclose **the purposes of the heart**. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

These are the reasons to be wary and Jesus knew the plight of our human condition is to let **fear** drive us when there is a system that puts pressure on us from without. That is exactly what He addressed next, which is our potential negative response to pressure.

Be Aware of the Fear that Wants to Control (12:4-7)

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.**

- **Reasons Why Fear is Real** - John 9

Fear is real and its something we all face, with some of us willing to admit it more readily than others. To illustrate the nature of the control the system had over the disciples who considered following Jesus, we look at John 9 and the story of a blind beggar who was healed by Jesus by putting mud on his eyes and washing at the pool of Siloam His disciples asked why this man was born blind (with the thought that someone had to have sinned for this to happen). Jesus answered that no one sinned, but this man was born this way so that "*the works of God might be displayed in him.*" (9:3). After receiving his sight, he did what you would expect: began telling people about it. The response was mixed: disbelief, explaining it away, and acceptance. The Pharisees brought this man in to question him, and he simply told the story again. Then they brought his parents in to find out if it was all real. His parents said it was their son, he WAS born blind, but could not say how he was healed. And here is the key text:

"His parents said these things* ('ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself) *because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ he was to be put out of the synagogue.

John 9:22

Now for us, that might not be a big deal. If we don't like the church we are a part of, we simply find one down the street that we do (to the stifling of our own growth). But the Pharisee's controlled not only worship location, but most major parts of life, and to go against them to follow Jesus would have affected these areas:

Social - Synagogues were social hubs, not just for entertainment, but social standing in a community. One's name and reputation was tied to his standing in the synagogue, and being dispelled from one would have consequence to the other. This is NO DIFFERENT than today. I would venture to say that none of us has feared for his life for confessing Christ, but many/most of us have feared for our reputation, what someone would have thought of us, or how it would change the relationship. For our younger generation where opinions are known and perpetuated in social media while devoid of real relationship, standing firm for absolutes, for truth, and for salvation through Jesus alone are not only unpopular, they put you in a category of narrow minded, unloving, and judgmental, which casts one out of the main stream. This fear is real and pervasive.

Familial - Notice that this man's parents were willing to throw him under the proverbial bus because they feared that connection with their son would change the rest of their lives. To follow Jesus, this man risked being cast out from his family. This fear is real, and sometimes

following Jesus changes family relationships. I have friends and family members that their decision to follow Jesus meant they were excluded from the family they were born into, often in heart wrenching sadness. But Jesus made it clear that this was absolutely the case in following Him (Luke 12:49-53; Matt. 10:37-39).

Religious - More than family pressure, there is religious pressure. Being put out of the synagogue meant that people would treat like one condemned, outside of the covenant. This was the dividing line faced by those who followed Jesus: they had to turn from what they had been taught to follow the One who could really save. This is the decision to follow a Person in Jesus more than a system of religion, since salvation is found in Christ alone, not a Church.

Financial - Finally, one would face financial implications if they were put out, since their livelihood was tied into their community standing. If you had much to lose financially, following Jesus would have been difficult, since it would require giving up what you had (which is what we will talk about next week)

These fears were real and they are relevant today. Following Jesus means a shifting of loyalty, a changing of systems, and a willingness to embrace our fears. The question we all need to answer: ***what are we afraid of?***

- **Reasons to Overcome Fear: Power & Value**

POWER - Do not fear those who can only do physical harm to you, but fear Him who has authority over your soul.

If this is not an argument from lesser to greater, I don't know what is. The fear of man is powerful because it exists temporally and affects our day to day. In our sin nature we have a built in capacity for insecurity, meaning we do not want to be cast out from the masses and be left alone. But it is clear the point that Jesus makes. For a follower of Jesus, the MOST someone can affect is our life in this world, while God has a say over our life now and in eternity to come. NOTE here that hell is viewed as a real place that people will go, and is viewed as far worse in degree than simply being killed. We live in a fear of God who cares for our existence but holds our eternity as well. When we know that our life is secure, hidden in Christ, death is not to be dreaded or feared, since our future is secure (Col. 3:3; 1 Peter 1:3-5).

VALUE - If the first reason was extreme in its finality, the second reason is extreme in its vitality. We are more valuable than the sparrows. Five sparrows would have fetched a price of about an hour's wage (at least before the minimum wage hike). Notice what Jesus' point: though they are worth almost nothing, **God remembers them.** He knows us so well that He knows the number of hairs on our head (which some heads may be easier to count than others). He does all of this because **He values us highly.** He is the one who calls us out of a world system, calls us out of death (Eph. 2:1-3), and sets us in opposition to the world. Suffering, persecution, and trials are NOT ways that God has forgotten, but ways in which he calls us to live for Him presently.

Our fears call us to feel alone, to feel like no one understands, or that no one cares. We stay in false systems because we don't want to be cut out. But Jesus lovingly reminds us that God values us highly, will provide for us, will not leave us or forsake us, and will finish what He completed in us (Phil. 1:6). He valued us so much that He was willing to sacrifice Christ on the cross to buy us back. He died for you. He loves you. He secures you. We do not need to fear the person who mocks us, the one who calls us narrow minded, or the one who shuns us. We cling to the one who holds the whole universe and our life in His hand.

In anticipating how fear affects us, Jesus addresses the logical progression of fear, and it has to do with our verbalization of Jesus, our willingness to acknowledge Him before man. This is a serious thing for us, because when we are afraid, we tend to say nothing. Before new ownership, when I'd go to Dodger stadium to watch them play the Giants in the pavilion, I would stay silent about my rooting interest in my team. I was afraid of the fallout, and no team is worth that type of injury. Fear causes us to stay silent, and in that silence is denial.

Be Aware of the Spirit that IS in Control (12:8-12)

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.**"

- **What Fear Produces: *Silent Denial***

Not many here this morning have actively denied Jesus (at least, I'm pretty sure that is the case). You've never verbalized that you do not believe that there is a Jesus, or that He exists, or that He died. But I'd put forward that most of us have been tempted to deny Jesus by failing to acknowledge Him before people, unwilling to let people know that we believe, that we follow Him, and believe He is the way of salvation.

Jesus minces no words here. We follow through and talk about what we truly believe, and we believe that following the world is more important than Christ when we close our mouths about Him. If we fail to acknowledge Him, He will do the same. Denial of Jesus means His denial of us. A follower of Jesus will be one who spreads the news about Him.

To bring comfort and hope, Jesus also said that those who spoke against Jesus can be forgiven, while those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit will not be. We have great examples of those who spoke against Jesus in **Peter and Paul**, the first while he was a disciple and the second before he was. Peter swore that he did not know Jesus, fearing the fallout of Jesus going to the cross when talking to a young girl. Paul denied Jesus by trying to wipe out His church. These were forgiven. But those who had persistently denied the work of the Spirit through Jesus, particularly His miracles while attributing them to Satanic work (Luke 11:14-26; Matt. 12:31-32) would not be forgiven (nor would they seek it).

- **What the Spirit Produces: *Boldness***

Jesus reminded His followers that there was a time coming when they would be questioned before these religious/political leaders, and they would be tempted to shy away in fear. He reminded them that they did not need to be **anxious** because the Spirit would embolden them to speak, recalling Scripture and the work of Jesus in their life as they would give testimony. This is seen clearly and powerfully in Peter's speech before the Pharisees in **Acts 4:5-13**.

"By what power or by what name did you do this? Then Peter, **filled with the Holy Spirit**, said to them, '**Rulers of the people and elders...let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you...and there is salvation in no one else...Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished.**'"

This did not mean the disciples were not prepared or intelligent, but they were reliant on the power of the Spirit, and that gave them boldness in the midst of intimidation, threats, and violence. We are not saved to stay silent, but to be bringers of the good news.

I take you back to the blind beggar who could now see. He was brought before the Pharisees once, where he gave testimony of what Jesus did. That was not sufficient for them so they drug him back a second time. Now he was short and to the point, "**Whether he is a sinner I do not know. ONE THING I do know, that thought I was blind, now I see.**" When they pressed him for the story again, he stood by his story and asked simply "Do you also want to become his disciples?" They told him they weren't sure about this Jesus, to which this uneducated beggar put them to shame: no one but someone from God could do this, yet you are blind to it. I was blind, but I see, why can't you. At this, they had enough. Called him an utter sinner, and **cast him out.**

This man had nothing but news. Nothing but the fact that he was blind and now he could see. He did not try to take down the establishment or call the system into question, but simply told the news of what happened to those who had not heard and could not understand. This is what speaking boldly in the midst of a fearful system looks like.

Four thoughts for us about fear and denial:

- **We fear because we have much to lose** - Often we believe we have too much to lose, too much stored up here on this earth (materially, socially, or financially) to risk speaking openly about Jesus
- **We fear because we forget we are simply sharers of news** - The apologetic of the man in John 9 and Peter in Acts 4 was not to out argue the opponents, but to declare the reality of the news. They both were willing to share what happened, "I was blind, now I see", and what was true, "There is no other name by which man can be saved except Jesus"
- **We fear because we forget God's power and care** - Our fear reveals who WE actually value. Do we value our own comfort, reputation, and well being, or the name that is above every name. What are you afraid of? That is not only a question to answer, but the answer is indicative of how we will live.
- **We fear because we forget we are beggars** - Much like the man in John 9, we too are mere beggars. This is what Martin Luther was said to have scribbled on his death bed "*We are beggars, this is true.*" and what D.T Niles picked up to say, "A Christian witness is not like a rich man who has a lot of bread which he hands out to the poor beggars who have nothing. *He is rather like one beggar who tells another beggar where he has found bread.*" When we remember this, it is possible to share the news.

Questions to discuss:

- **What are the systems of control around us today that keep people blinded to the light of Jesus (think both organized and informal religions)? How do these cause people to fear?**
- **What areas of improper fear do we face** (especially in social, family, and financial ways)?
- **How do we overcome our fear, especially in areas of sharing the news?**
- **In what ways, subtle ways, can we deny Jesus with our words** (or lack thereof)?
- **What would a BOLD witness look like in our culture?**