

Subject Gospel of Luke

This Message #19

Scripture Luke 12:1-12

For several weeks we have been thinking about the characteristics of disciples. In preparing this message I reread the passages we thought about and made a list of the characteristics of a disciple. We have learned that a disciple:

- *Lets Jesus rule his/her life
- *Is concerned about God's kingdom
- *Chooses holy living
- *Depends on God for wisdom, guidance, and physical needs
- *Says "no" to selfish concerns
- *Says "Yes" to the needs of others
- *Is willing to suffer for God's sake
- *Gives credit and glory to God

This is actually a partial list, and the characteristics are stated in simple phrases. If we are honest, I think we will have to admit that we have a lot of room for growth in our discipleship. Here's a question we should think about: If religious police accused you of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

In addition to the characteristics, there are several attitudes and behaviors that we have thought about. For examples, disciples must be ready to forgive others, love their enemies, be merciful to those who persecute them, and treat others as they want others to treat them.

Last week we thought about prayer. Today we will think about another attitude that distinguishes true disciples from those who are not so genuine.

Read Luke 12:1-12

The theme of these verses is made clear by the repeated references to "fear not" and "do not be afraid." There are seven references to this theme. We need to keep this theme in mind as we think about the passage.

When Jesus said these words, He was in the midst of a rather frightening situation. A crowd of several thousand had gathered, and people were trampling on one another. Without the context we might assume that the people were pushing and shoving in their eagerness to be close to Jesus to hear what He might say or to see what miracle he might perform. However, chapter 11 describes a different situation.

Some individuals in the crowd were opposing Jesus and trying to stop His ministry. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were spearheading this action against Jesus. In the midst of the chaos, Jesus said, "The person who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather, scatters" (*Luke 11:23*). The individuals in this large crowd were taking sides. They were either in agreement with the angry religious leaders of Israel, and hence, hostile toward Jesus, or else they were supportive of Jesus and therefore at odds with the religious establishment of their own nation. There were probably heated arguments throughout the crowd. That is the background going into chapter 12.

The chaos in the crowd was a perfect opportunity for Jesus to teach His disciples about the "yeast of the Pharisees," which He said was "hypocrisy." From God's standpoint, the Pharisees were hypocrites because they pretended to be righteous, knowledgeable, and authentic followers of the ways of God, when in fact they were proud, corrupt, selfish, and disobedient.

The Greek word for hypocrisy referred to a mask used in theater productions. The mask was used to hide the identity of the actor and to make people think that they were seeing a pretend character. The Pharisees wore "masks of hypocrisy" because they were concerned about how they were perceived by others. They were less concerned about what God might think about them. Their focus was on how others saw them. Their focus was on the outward appearance, not on the heart.

The Pharisees were supposed to be God's representatives before the people. They were supposed to know all about the promises and prophecies of God, and yet they were bitterly opposed to Jesus. In their zeal to maintain the Law, the Pharisees missed the truth to which the Law pointed. Jesus said that the Pharisees were like the false prophets of the Old Testament. Although they had positions of great influence and prestige from a human standpoint, Jesus considered them to be hypocrites and said that their ungodly influence was like yeast which was contaminating the nation of Israel.

Yeast is mentioned in several places in Scripture. Yeast is often a symbol of corruption and sin because of its pervasive effect (*see Exodus 12:14-20; 1 Corinthians 5:6*). Yeast is a baker's friend — a small amount makes all the bread dough expand. However, in religious matters, what begins as a little false teaching can expand until the understanding of the truth of God becomes thoroughly corrupted and contaminated. That is what had happened over the centuries among the Pharisees.

Verses 2 and 3 are the most important verses in this passage. There are two interpretations of these verses, one general, with broad application, and the other more specific. The first interpretation is based on the omniscience of God. This attribute describes God's ability to know everything. Because He knows all things, nothing can be concealed from God or hidden from Him. Words spoken in the dark or whispered in private rooms are known to God. Jesus said that a time is coming in which all the secrets of people will be revealed, even shouted from the rooftops. The true nature of people's lives, and their innermost thoughts, will ultimately be made known. (*See 1 Timothy 5:24-25.*) According to this interpretation, a hypocrite is an especially foolish person because he assumes that his true nature will never be discovered.

The first interpretation is true. However, it is possible that Jesus was applying the words of verses 2 and 3 to His disciples in a more specific way. This second interpretation has to do with the attitudes and behaviors of the disciples. I said earlier that the general theme of this passage has to do with fear.

Jesus knew that fear has a negative impact on everyone, including His followers. He knew that ridicule, insults, threats, societal, and familial pressures might cause some of His disciples to "pull back," to "lie low," and to "soft pedal," the proclamation of the Gospel, and even compromise their Christian lifestyle. If disciples try to conceal their identity as the followers of Jesus Christ, they will be guilty of hypocrisy. If they try to disguise their born-again spiritual nature, it will indicate that they have a greater fear of non-believers than of God.

Jesus knew that His disciples would find themselves in fearful situations in the future, and so He was encouraging them to stand firm in their faith no matter how frightening a situation might be. Disciples who are pleasing to God must live out their faith in a bold and public way. Jesus never backed down when confronted with His critics. Likewise, disciples must not be intimidated by circumstances.

Let me give you an example of a disciple who became a hypocrite. You will remember that the Apostle Peter, after the arrest of Jesus, denied three times that he was a follower of Jesus. He even used swear words in one of the denials. Peter pretended that he did not know Jesus because he was afraid of what would happen to him if his association with Jesus became known.

When a person makes a commitment to Jesus Christ, he/she must live out that commitment in ways which are pleasing to God. Unfortunately, believers can sometimes become so afraid of the embarrassment and abuse that will be heaped on them by non-believers that they choose to act like pagans. This is not only a denial of their relationship with Jesus Christ, but a form of dishonesty. It is putting up a mask to prevent people from recognizing the believer's true spiritual nature. It is hypocrisy. If we think of ourselves as disciples, then we need to always, consistently, act faithfully and loyally to Jesus regardless of the consequences which might be inflicted by wicked unbelieving people.

Jesus did not try to minimize the fact that His disciples would be arrested, questioned by authorities, ridiculed, suffer, and be killed by those who were opposed to the Gospel. His goal was to help them be emotionally prepared for the future. He told His disciples that they should not be afraid of those who can only inflict bodily pain and bring about physical death. Physical death is the ultimate harm that one person can do to another. Of far greater significance is the power that God has over the eternal destiny of a person. He has the power to throw people into hell. Thus, the fear of man, which might incline a disciple to hypocrisy, should be overshadowed by his fear of God, who demands honesty and loyalty. Our emphasis must be on the life to come, not on temporal difficulties.

Fortunately, the One who is to be feared is also the One who has a deep love and intimate concern for His disciples. God is intimately aware of all that can happen to people who place their faith in Him and follow His ways. As Jesus said, the Father knows and cares about each sparrow. He also knows the number of hairs on a person's head. If God, in His omniscience, knows all about the small and insignificant things of this life, He certainly knows about all the big things that can affect His people. They are of immense value to Him. They are the ones for whom He sent His Son to redeem.

What it all comes down to is a choice of allegiance. Those who acknowledge Jesus and openly identify themselves with Him and maintain a vibrant testimony to Him in spite of the pressures and threats of non-believers will receive due reward. Jesus, the Son of Man, will acknowledge them before the angelic witnesses of heaven. On the other hand, those who disown or deny Jesus out of fear will be similarly disowned before the angels. The words, “acknowledge” and “disowned” are exact opposites in meaning. Verse 9 is apparently a reference to the final judgment at the end of the age, and may be what Jesus was referring to in verse 3.

I assume that none of us have had to deal with any kind of physical torture or threats of death because of our faith, but such is the daily experience of believers in many locations around the world. The most that any of us have to worry about is what non-believers think about us. In my lifetime, the legal and societal pressures on believers have increased but, compared to believers in other places, we have no reasons in America not to be completely open about our faith.

We can understand from these verses that Jesus was concerned about the faithfulness of His disciples. In the Church of the first centuries, believers who faced the dangers and threats of the Roman empire were called by one of two names. Hypocrites tried to hide their faith by being secret believers, and when apprehended, often denied and recanted their faith. Another kind of believer was known as a “confessor” of Christ. Confessors were believers who stood boldly and faithfully in spite of opposition. They openly acknowledged to their tormentors that they had placed their faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord, and were followers of the way of Jesus.

In the first 200 years of the Church, there were literally thousands of these faithful “confessors” who were killed because they refused to hide or recant their faith. Throughout the past 2000 years there have been hundreds of thousands more believers who were faithful unto death. This raises the question whether our faith is strong enough to endure the more limited pressures of ridicule and threat that we may face. In the passage today, Jesus has given us some perspective about what we must do when the pressure is on.

The final warning in the sequence of warnings relates to the so-called “unpardonable sin.” Verse 10 is the climax of Jesus’ instructions to His disciples on this occasion. There is a lot of debate about the proper interpretation of this verse. Whenever I come to a verse which has an uncertain interpretation, there are two thoughts I bring to mind: What did the words mean to the original listeners? and How do those words apply to me? I think we can answer both of these questions satisfactorily.

Scripture states that, while Jesus was on earth, the Holy Spirit was given to Him in unlimited measure. The Holy Spirit worked powerfully through Jesus, especially through the miracles that He performed. One such miracle was described in chapter 11. However, this miracle was attributed by Jesus’ critics to the power of Satan (*see 11:14-15*).

This was an unconscionable sin, an insult to God. The religious leaders, who made this blasphemous statement, had seen with their eyes dramatic evidence that God’s Spirit was at work, yet they hardened their hearts against Jesus. This happened on several occasions. The religious leaders set their whole lives and hearts against the witness of the Spirit through Jesus Christ. In turning away from the truth which was revealed to them, their hearts were hardened to such an extent that there was no spiritual remedy for them. They could not be forgiven.

The question for us to determine is whether such a sin can be committed today. If the unpardonable sin represents persistent opposition to the truth of Jesus as revealed by the Spirit, then the answer is “yes.” It seems to me that people who repeatedly turn their hearts away from the witness of the Holy Spirit can reach a point in which their hearts are hardened beyond forgiveness. Only God knows when a person crosses that line, but the lesson for us is this: disrespect for God’s work is a serious matter. The mission of the Holy Spirit is to convict people of their sin, bring knowledge of God’s righteousness, and convince them about the coming judgment which awaits all those who reject Jesus Christ, God’s anointed Savior. The person who obstinately and persistently rejects the witness of the Holy Spirit is in grave danger. Such a person can become hardened in unbelief and will not be forgiven.

Jesus said that personal criticism of Himself was forgivable, but rejection of the Holy Spirit's testimony was not. This was why Jesus warned His disciples against the "yeast" of the Pharisees. They were not to allow little lumps of doubt and fear and lack of obedience into their lives. They were not to allow the pressures brought about by evil-doers to weaken their confidence in God and tempt them to repudiate their faith in Him.

Throughout the middle chapters of Luke, Jesus was preparing His disciples for their future ministries. He knew that they would have to confess their faith in Him before hostile religious and political bodies, both Jewish and Gentile. Judas committed suicide because of his betrayal of Jesus, but all of the other apostles faced opposition and interrogation by religious and political authorities. In point of fact, tradition and history indicate that all of them, except perhaps John, were martyrs. They were faithful to the end of their lives.

I'm sure that they thought of Jesus' words on many occasions. Verses 11 and 12 would have been very important to them. Jesus assured the disciples of the Holy Spirit's guidance and help when they needed to defend themselves. Instead of resisting the Holy Spirit, the disciples were to allow the Holy Spirit to speak through them.

There is no reason for a believer to be fearful or to resort to hypocrisy. We have our powerful heavenly Father to care for us and keep us safe until the end (verses 6 and 7), Jesus to stand up for us (verse 8), and the Holy Spirit to instruct us when we are under pressure (verses 11-12). The Triune God has provided us with every reason to live an honest, open, and fearless life to the glory of God.

Again, I ask the question: If you were accused of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, would there be enough evidence to convict you?