

Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees (Luke 12:1-12)

Sunday school April 30, 2017

I want to call you attention to **READ Luke 12:1-12**. Last week we studied the last part of chapter 11. Jesus was dining with a group of Pharisees, scribes, and lawyers, and while He is doing that He lays out point by point, in very direct and I would say harsh fashion, the case He and ultimately God has against the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, scribes, and lawyers. Jesus was very loving, compassionate, and gentle toward people seeking God's grace. He was very harsh toward people who thought they had merit before God based on their own works.

In this chapter, He starts by addressing the disciples, and He warns them in verse 1 against the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. So He is giving His disciples instructions on how to deal with the Pharisees. As we read the instructions, especially the part about the Holy Ghost at the end, it becomes clear that He is thinking about the fact that He will not be physically with the disciples a whole lot longer. This entire section from chapter 9 to chapter 19 is entitled "Going to Jerusalem," and He will soon get to Jerusalem, fulfill His mission, and ascend back to the Father. So He was getting ready to leave; the Pharisees were not. After He leaves, the Jewish leaders are going to entrap and find reasons to accuse His disciples just like they did Him while He was on this earth. Therefore, His disciples were going to have to deal with the Pharisees just like He did. We still deal with Pharisees today, although in our part of the world they are not usually Jewish Pharisees but secular Pharisees and even Christian Pharisees: people who think they have merit before God in themselves. One of my former pastors in Georgia said, "it always comes down to works versus grace: what are you going to trust in for righteousness before God?" So today we are going to study the instructions Jesus gives to His disciples on how to deal with the Pharisees.

Transition: So let me HAND OUT OUTLINES. First instruction...

I. Beware (of Hypocrisy) READ v. 1-3 Back when my mom was alive, she used to make pizza from scratch. I made pizza yesterday...by taking it out of the box and putting it in the oven...but she made pizza from scratch. When she went to make the crust, she took several big cups of flour, a few eggs, a few other ingredients, and finally she put in one of these little bity packets of yeast. Why such a little packet of yeast for such a big pizza crust? That's all it takes. One of my favorite verses to say in scripture is Galatians 5:9: "A little leaven leaveth the whole lump." It doesn't take much self-righteousness or hypocrisy in your life to wreck your spiritual life. A little bit will completely ruin your fellowship with God.

The other interesting thing about yeast is that you don't see its effects at first. If you watch the lump of dough sitting on the table, it doesn't look like anything is happening. If you cover it up with a bowl, go away, and come back in an hour, you realize it has risen; it has gotten bigger. That's the idea in verses 2 and 3: hypocrisy is not always recognized at first. In the points He laid out against the Pharisees that we studied last week, one of the main emphases was the appearance versus reality, or the outside versus the inside. He compared them to whitewashed tombs. They look clean and nice on the outside, but inside its a tomb full of decaying, rotting, stinking flesh. The reality or inside isn't always obvious at first because man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. Regardless of the outward appearance, nobody has righteousness of themselves on the inside. Because God looks on the heart, He ensures that will come out. So beware of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. It only takes a little to ruin your spiritual life. Even if others can't see it now, God sees it, and it will be seen eventually.

Transition: Next instruction...

II. Fear Not Jesus gives them two reasons they should not be afraid. The first one is...

IIA. Enemies Have Limited Power READ v. 4-5 On its face, this is a ridiculous instruction (just drive your car into the path of the oncoming semi; what's the worst that could happen?), and it would be ridiculous if it wasn't for the presence of an almighty God who cares for His people. The first reference I gave you is Isaiah 51:12,13. God is speaking to His people, and He says to them, "I, even I, am he that comforteth you: who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man which shall be made as grass; 13 And forgettest the LORD thy maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth; and hast feared continually every day because of the fury of the oppressor, as if he were ready to destroy? and where is the fury of the oppressor?" Back when my mom was alive, she would do the motherly thing and worry about me when I would go hiking by myself. She would say, "I'm worried that someone or some bear, wolf, snake or yellowjacket is going to get you." I take sensible precautions against that kind of thing, but I don't worry about it. I've told you about the time I broke my leg when I was hiking, lost the trail, and fell down a waterfall. Even when I thought I might die in that ravine, I knew God was with me in that ravine.

I marvel at the faith of martyrs that I read about, both in ages past and more recent, who chose to physically die rather than deny our Lord. I hope I have that kind of faith. I will also be perfectly honest with you and say that I hope I never find out for sure if I have that kind of faith. Nevertheless, Jesus does not warn them against persecution. He doesn't say, "beware of persecution" here like He said beware of hypocrisy in the first point, but He says do not fear persecution. One reason is because the people persecuting you have limited power compared to God.

Transition: The other reason we should not fear is...

IIB. God Values Us READ v. 6-7 Here Jesus is giving a logical argument here for how much God values His people. A sparrow is an insignificant thing. He says 5 of them are sold for 2 farthings in the market, which is a very trivial amount of money. My neighbor's cat probably kills several sparrows every year (she left another dead chipmunk on my doorstep this week), and nobody really cares. Yet God knows what happens to every sparrow. Jesus tells His disciples in verse 7, "ye are of more value than many sparrows." So the argument is that if God oversees the minor things, things nobody seems to care about (the sparrow), then surely He oversees the major things (us, whom He directly says is of more value than many sparrows). One of the charges Jesus laid against the Pharisees that we studied last week is that they did the minor thing but neglected the major thing. They tithed on the tiniest bit of increase, yet they neglected to hear and do God's word. God doesn't make that mistake. Everything is under the oversight of God, the minor things and the major things.

When my mom was sick and in the hospital a few years ago, I frequently had to go straight from the hospital to campus to teach my classes, and I usually arrived on campus with only a few minutes to spare. When I pulled into the parking lot that is located right outside my office and classroom building, without fail I would always find exactly 1 vacant spot in the entire lot. Coincidence? No, God made sure that was there for me. That's a small thing. The bottomless pit would not crack open if I was 2 minutes late to class one day, but God took care of the little thing. He also takes care of the big things. He took care of the biggest problem I will ever have when He paid for my sin on the cross. So we see that He values us because of the care He shows for us. Just like the sparrow can be bought, sold, and killed, we can suffer persecution, but never outside of God's knowledge and never outside of God's care. Don't avoid persecution, but don't fear it.

Transition: Next instruction...

III. Confess Him Before Men READ v. 8-10 This is the positive side of not fearing. Instead of caving in due to fear, stay true to the faith. This instruction is repeated several times in the epistles, including in II Tim. 2:12 and I John 2:23, probably because it is so tempting to deny Him in order to save your physical life. This topic came up in a Sunday school class I was teaching quite a few years ago up in Ohio, and a guy who didn't come to class very often raised his hand and said, "wouldn't Jesus understand if you had to deny Him once to extend your life and testify of Him more later?" Short answer: no! First, you would be lying. Second, if you deny Him once, your testimony for Him is wrecked, as is your fellowship with Him. That's the point of verse 10.

The last phrase in verse 10 bothers some people who don't understand the context. They think, "if I commit that sin of blaspheming the Holy Ghost (whatever you might think that means), I can't be forgiven it, so I'll lose my salvation and be condemned to hell." No, Jesus and the Bible talk repeatedly about the seal of the Holy Spirit on believers, how unbreakable it is (we can't even break it ourselves), and how all your sin, past, present, and future got paid. He's talking to His disciples here, people most of whom believe and are following Him. In this context, blaspheming the Holy Ghost means denying your faith before men, and the issue is not salvation but fellowship. We usually think of that in terms of our words, but it can also be through our actions. If we deny Him before men, our fellowship with Him will be damaged so badly that it will never be repaired in this world. You'll still have a home in heaven, but you'll never have the fellowship with Him you ought to have. Regardless of the cost, confess Him in words and actions before men.

Transition: Last instruction...

IV. Worry Not READ v. 11-12 I wanted to call this point "think not" after His words in verse 11 "take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer," but that could be misinterpreted, so I went with worry not. This is hard for me to do. If you have been part of this class for a while, you know that I am not a good communicator. To compensate for that, I try to make sure I think pretty deeply about what I'm going to say before I get up here and say it. I like having that luxury, but in some situations I don't. Sometimes I have to come up with something to say on the spur of the moment. Often when that happens, after I reflect and think about what I said on the spur of the moment, I realize that I didn't say quite what I think I should have. It would have been so much better if I would have said something else. But He says don't worry about that. If I am in fellowship with Him, what I say will be what He wanted me to say even if it's not what I later think I should have said. So don't worry about what you are going to say; concern yourself with staying in fellowship with Him.

Conclusion

As a final thought, we have not yet faced persecution like His disciples would after He left. I hope we never do, but we still face things that cause us to fear and worry. A little over an hour from now, Dale Bradley is going to step out from behind the pulpit behind me probably for the last time. A few weeks ago, I sat up pretty late at night one night worrying about that. I've really viewed my purpose and ministry here as one to hold up his hands and extend his ministry for as long as possible. Maybe I have been successful, and maybe not. With that no longer needed, why does God have me here? In the short run, my job is to ease the transition as much as possible, but what about the long-run? What if the church elects a pastor that I can't work under? That happened at a church I worked in over in Georgia. After a few hours of sitting up and worrying about it, I just said, "Lord, you're in control of this. I trust You to lead me where you want me. I don't worry about this any more." I've thought about it some, but I haven't worried about it since then. So don't fear, don't deny the faith, don't stop serving Him, and don't worry about the future. Those are the instructions of Jesus to His disciples concerning the Pharisees.