

Luke 12

12:1-12: THE YEAST OF THE PHARISEES; PERSECUTION

1. The yeast of the Pharisees is hypocrisy, according to 12:1. This warning is tied (“meanwhile”—v. 1) to a preceding passage describing a very uncomfortable dinner party in which Jesus condemns the Pharisees who pursued purity with rigor while seeking the places of honor, and neglecting love of God and neighbor. The tone of the previous passage was dark, being the first time outside Jesus’ home town that the crowd accused Jesus. The crowd at the start of chapter 12 remains a threatening presence, swelling to proportions so immense that people are being trampled.

The warning about hypocrisy is followed by the reassurance not to be afraid of those who can “kill the body” (4-7), and instructions regarding interrogation by secular and religious officials. In light of this context, what is Jesus warning about in vv. 1-3?

2. The sinister warning in vv. 1-3 is followed by some of the Bible’s least comforting words of comfort, in which the disciples are told not to fear the violent and murderous, but to fear God instead (vv. 4-7). The comfort offered to all Jesus’ disciples is that God knows every intimate detail of our lives and values us more than the sparrows, whom God also does not forget.

Evans and Wright suggest that Jesus’ instruction to fear God uses “fear” with the connotation found in the wisdom literature, where to “fear” God is to “hold [Him] in respect” (Evans). The word *phobos* is used in a variety of ways in Luke:

- “When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and ***phobos*** overwhelmed him” (1:12)
- “His mercy is for those who ***phobos*** him from generation to generation” (1:50)
- “***Phobos*** came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about...” (1:65)
- “that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without ***phobos***” (1:74)
- “***Phobos*** seized all of them; and they glorified God...” (7:16)
- “Then all the people... asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great ***phobos***.” (8:37)
- “When Jesus heard this, he replied, ‘Do not ***phobos***. Only believe, and she will be saved.’” (8:50)
- “**...do not *phobos* those who kill the body... But I will warn you whom to *phobos*: *phobos* him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, *phobos* him!**” (12:5)
- “For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no ***phobos*** of God and no respect for anyone...’” (18:4)
- “People will faint from ***phobos*** and foreboding of what is coming upon the world...” (21:26)
- “But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not ***phobos*** God, since you are under the same sentence?’” (23:40)

Based strictly on its use in Luke, how would you translate *phobos* in 12:4-5?

3. This passage (12:1-12) is followed by the parable of the Rich Fool, who hedges against a loss which he cannot prevent. In that parable we are told “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (15). Put together, these passages appear to say to the modern middle-class reader, “You fear not having money to put kids through college; a grey, minimal retirement; the unexpected diseases which takes you or your loved ones; dying alone. God may or may not prevent these things, but will be with you in them and will, if you let him, allow you to work for his kingdom even in the midst of them. Without God you face the danger of a life without meaning, a name which is forgotten, accomplishments which fade. God is not offering you security; he is offering you a life that *matters*.”

In Col 3:1-3, Paul also directs his readers to focus on the eternal rather than the temporal:

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Setting one's mind on the things that are above is easier said than done, in the thick of life with its many burdens and distractions. If you agree with the above reading of 12:4-7, when in your life have you had the most success in focusing on the eternal? What activities, whether meditative (Bible study, journaling, fasting, prayer) or more active (service, *koinonia*, worship), or locations, or people, have helped you “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven”? (If you disagree with this reading, what would be a better interpretation?)

4. In 12:8-12, the disciples are told that though they will be forgiven what they *say* against Jesus, if they *deny* him before others Jesus will deny them before “the angels of God.” As if that weren't confusing enough, it is followed by the popularly enigmatic warning of the sin against the Holy Spirit. The S.A.T.H.S. has been interpreted various ways, including apostasy, attributing Jesus' work to Satan (11:14-20), rejecting apostolic teaching, blaspheming the Trinity (Cyril of Alexandria), etc. Wright describes the typical reading:

If someone denounces the work of the Spirit, such a person is cut off by that very action from profiting from that work... Once you declare that the spring of fresh water is in fact polluted, you will never drink from it. The one sure thing about this saying is that if someone is anxious about having committed the sin against the Holy Spirit, their anxiety is a clear sign that they have not. (149-150)

Bock adds that Jesus most likely warns not of a single action but persistent rejection of the Spirit's testimony about Jesus. Even assuming we agree with Wright and Bock, we are left with the question of what denial of Jesus is unforgivable, given that we are forgiven for saying things against him.

Craig Evans reads this passage as addressing

...those who not only denied Jesus, but actively sought his death, and then later regretted it. Verse 10 declares that forgiveness is possible; but not when someone blasphemes against the Holy Spirit... What we are to understand is that the rejection of Jesus himself during his earthly ministry can be forgiven, but for those who reject the proclamation of his resurrection, a proclamation inspired by the prompting of the Spirit of God, there can be no forgiveness. (195)

Evans observes that “in Acts 2-3 many of those (indirectly) responsible for Jesus' death are confronted with the good news of Jesus' resurrection” repent and are saved.

Given the context (persecution) and the connotation of “Son of Man” (judgment), what do you think of Evan's proposal?

THE FIRE IS KINDLED: 12:49-56

5. This passage begins with an “I have come” mission statement. Others of these can be found in Luke, and especially in John:
 - 5:32: “*I have come* to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”
 - 7:34: “the Son of Man *has come* eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'”
 - Jn 3:2: “He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher *who has come* from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.””
 - Jn 7:28: “Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, “You know me, and you know where I am from. *I have not come* on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him.”
 - Jn 12:27: ““Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that *I have come* to this hour. ”
 - Jn 12:47: “ I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for *I came* not to judge the world, but to save the world.”
 - Jn 18:37: “Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this

I was born, and *for this I came* into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

- a) Jesus came “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (1:79; see also 2:14; 8:48; 10:5-6). How can he be bringing both peace and strife?
 - b) In 12:49 Jesus speaks of fire. Fire is associated with judgment, purification, the Holy Spirit, etc. Other uses of this imagery in Luke include 3:9, 17; 9:54; 17:29. In light of these, what do you think Jesus is referring to here in his use of “fire”? How does this fit into Jesus’ mission?
 - c) The beginning of verse 50’s “*what stress I am under* until it is completed” (NRSV) translates the Greek *sunecho*.¹ This verb has the connotation of being squeezed by circumstances. It is the same word used of the crowds pressing in on Jesus in 8:45, and by Paul in Phil 1:2, “I am *hard pressed* between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.” What baptism² is Jesus referring to?
6. Verses 53-59 have a three-fold structure:
- A: 52-53: The social breakdown brought by the Gospel³
 - B: 54-56: A warning to interpret the signs
 - C: 57-59: Jesus warns the people to pursue reconciliation

Determine how, if at all, these are tied together:

- a) Is *A* one of the signs that *B* wants interpreted?
 - b) Is Jesus recommending *C* as the action to take when the sign appears?
 - c) The passage has themes of both judgment and strife. Whom does *C* tell to reconcile?
7. Wright writes about *B*,

The church has from early on read this chapter as a warning that each generation must read the signs of the times, the great movements of people, governments, nations and policies, and must react accordingly. If the kingdom of God is to come on earth as it is in heaven, part of the prophetic role of the church is to understand the events of earth and to seek to address them with the message of heaven. And if, like Jesus, we find that we seem to be bringing division, and that we ourselves become caught up in the crisis, so be it. What else would we expect?

In particular, there may come a time when Christian teachers and preachers find... that people have become too cozy and comfortable. Sometimes, for instance, the selections of Bible readings for church services omit all the passages that speak of judgment, of warnings, of the stern demands of God’s holiness. Maybe three are times when, like Jesus himself on this occasion, we need to wake people up with a crash. There are, after all, plenty of warnings in the Bible about the dangers of going to sleep on the job. (160-161).

During the fourth-century credal struggles, or the Reformation, or the times of great battles over suffrage or emancipation, the signs may have been easier to interpret. Yet our day is not without its strife. What is God doing in our day? How can we ensure we aren’t sitting on the sidelines?

8. Jesus warns in 12:52-53 that the gospel will at times tear even families apart. Elsewhere Jesus’ teaching marks family relationships as a potential stumbling block (14:26: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother...”), while at the same time Jesus establishes a fictive family of believers (8:21: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it”).⁴ This was profoundly counter-cultural:

As his present discourse, begun in 12:1, has already made clear, a decision to adopt his canons of faithfulness to God would require a deeply routed and pervasive transformation of how one

1 It is alternately translated “*how I long* for it to be finished” (The Message), “*what constraint I am under* until it is completed” (NIV), “*how distressed I am* until it is accomplished” (NASB), “*how strained I am* until it is over” (JB Phillips). I Howard Marshall likes for this verb, “to be distressed” or “to be dominated by (a thought)” (547).

2 “The verb *baptizo* is used here without primary reference to the rite of baptism, but in the metaphorical sense of being overwhelmed by catasphrophe; this use is not found in the LXX but is not uncommon in Hellenistic sources and in the later Greek versions of the OT.” (I. Howard Marshall, 547.)

3 Calling to mind Micah 7:6, which describes the prophet turning to God for deliverance from the same strife.

4 See also 8:19-21; 9:57-62; 14:25-35; 18:28-30.

understands God and how one understands the transformation of the world purposed by this God. This would involve Jesus' disciples in dispositions and forms of behavior that could only be regarded as deviant within their kin groups. Earlier Jesus had been concerned to prepare his disciples for the persecution before the authorities that would result from identification with his mission (vv 1-12); now he maintains that his ministry has as one of its consequences the deconstruction of the conventional family bonds. (Green, 509)

In modern Western culture, family relationships tend to differ from other close relationships. With the family we celebrate holidays; eat regularly; share time at holidays; exchange gifts at Christmas and birthdays; lay out vast sums for education and upbringing; maintain various levels of personal contact; etc. (Anything else?)

- a) Are there any of these for which you are as fully engaged with a person or people you aren't related to as you would be for a member of your own family?
- b) For church-going families Jesus' warning may seem blessedly remote. The danger of unhealthy compromise for the Christian family may simply come in a different form. If the "default" is Christian belief rather than pagan or Jewish, compromise may represent tolerating gradual acculturation or even failure to confront a wandering member of the family in the hope that he or she will return.

Are there areas in your family life where lack of strife may be a danger sign?

Ω

Fun Fact: Augustine helpfully comments on 12:7, where Jesus says God has numbered the hairs on our head, "When our Lord said, 'not a hair,' he was not thinking of length but of the number of hairs." From there he wanders off, his eyes becoming distant, his empty wine glass tilting in his hand: "I *still* think that nothing that was a natural part of the body should be lost. Ugly outgrowths, which have the purpose of reminding us of the penal condition of mortal life will be integrated into the substance as a whole so that no deformity will appear in any one part. After all, a human artist can make a botch of a statue and then reshape it into beauty without a loss of any of his material..."

Further Fun Fact, since we are discussing one of the least comforting passages of comfort: Any Episcopalian will gladly go on at length (empty wine glass tilting in his hand) about the "Comfortable Words" in the Eucharistic liturgy, which are "A series of sentences from scripture that provide encouragement for penitent sinners. The term 'comfortable' originally meant 'strengthening.' The comfortable words date from the 1548 Order of the Communion... [and] are based on Mt 11:28 [come to me all ye who are heavy laden], Jn 3:16 [you know this one], 1 Tim 1:15 [the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners] and 1 Jn 2:1-2 [if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ]" (*An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, p. 110).