

Remaining Loyal to Jesus in a Hostile World

Luke 12:1-12

Throughout 12:1-13:9, one theme that keeps recurring and unites the entire passage is living in the light of the end, that is, in the light of our final accountability to God, whether at the end of life, or when Christ returns. Each account in this section reflects on how the end should shape the present.

Within the larger unit, 12:1-12 focuses more narrowly on facing persecution, and on how the end should affect one's present response to persecution. Of course, this was a much bigger issue for the first few generations of Christians than it is for us. Still, it carries helpful reminders for us, including regarding our responsibility toward the persecuted church.

Day 1: Luke 12:1 A crowd gathers, and Jesus warns his disciples.

What a downer! A crowd gathers, and so great a crowd that they are stepping on each other's toes, yet instead of celebrating his celebrity, Jesus warns the disciples to be careful. Hardly what one would expect to be an effective marketing strategy!

In 1990, Darius Salter, a seminary professor, wrote *What Really Matters In Ministry: Profiling Pastoral Success in Flourishing Churches*. One of his conclusions, based on his survey of pastors of fast-growing and large churches, was that popular preaching is characterized chiefly by 'unconditional positive regard.'

There's a lot to be said for looking for the best in people, and for facing life with mild optimism. All the same, there's a place for serious warning (as we saw last week, in Jesus' woes against the Pharisees, 11:37-54), and for sober reflection: 'Be on your guard! Watch out!' We give thought to this passage of warning because it is part of Scripture, and thus, of a full-orbed Christian understanding of life. And the first take-home point is not to lose our heads when a ministry grows quickly, or when Christianity becomes a popular movement. Large numbers are often – but not always – a sign of God's blessing. Still, success can be temporary and fleeting; it is not always lasting or permanent.

Day 2: Luke 12:1-3 Beware of hypocrisy? What's hypocrisy got to do with it?

In Greek, Jesus warns his disciples about the Pharisees' *hupocrisis*. Since this is the word from which we get 'hypocrisy', we naturally assume that they are cognate in meaning (an assumption which the NIV also makes). As it happens, however, the two words are 'false cognates'; they look alike, but they mean something much different. Originally, in Greek, the word *hupocrisis* arose in the context of theater, and meant 'play-acting'. Moving outside the theater, that readily slides into our meaning for 'hypocrisy'. So readers of the English Bible typically assume that Jesus' complaint against the Pharisees was that they *appeared* spiritual, though they were actually – and inwardly – *wicked*.

But in the Greek Old Testament, *hupokrisis* translates a Hebrew word meaning 'godless' (now aren't you glad you got up early to have your devotions this morning?). Throughout the Gospels, the Pharisees' particular form of 'godlessness' was malice and evil intent toward Jesus and his followers. For example, in Mark 12:15, Jesus recognized their 'hypocrisy' in trying to trap him into a political misstatement that could cost him his life. In Matt 23:28, he disparages their 'hypocrisy' and 'wickedness', referring to their persecution of him, and their ancestors' persecution of the prophets. Immediately before the present text, Luke 11:53-54 comments that the Pharisees opposed Jesus fiercely, trying to catch him in some heresy that would justify his execution. So in the Gospels, the sin of the Pharisees is persecution. And Jesus point here is that if they persecuted him, they will persecute his followers.

In this context, then, when Jesus warns his disciples that whatever they do in secret will be disclosed, that whatever they do in private will be made public, he is not urging them to live with integrity, he is not exhorting them that their lives should match their words. He is telling them that they cannot escape persecution by remaining secret followers: no matter how they try to hide it, their faith will become public, and when it does, persecution will come.

Of course, it is highly unlikely that we will face persecution. Yet rather than not applying to us at all, this passage applies all the more. If Jesus expected these early disciples to remain faithful in the face of threats to their lives, how much more does he expect of us, when we face milder threats, or no threats at all!

Some may challenge our convictions at school, in college, or at work, when issues come up that oppose Christian values. There's no need or call for Christians to initiate public confrontation, yet in contexts where we might be disparaged for our faith, Jesus warns against slinking away in silence or denial.

Day 3: Luke 12:4-5 Say what?!

Perhaps nowhere is Jesus more at odds with our culture than here! Christian faith is meant to provide us a warm-hearted relationship with God and a meaningful life. In contrast, Jesus warns that faith may bring martyrdom, and that those under persecution should fear God more than their tormentors. Torturers can kill you, but their power ends there; God can throw you into hell for eternity.

Where is the God of infinite love, eager to forgive all our sins, whatever they be, whenever they occur? By our standards, this seems an extraordinarily insensitive, brutish comment. No expression of sympathy. No reassurance that God would understand the pressure that drove the persecuted to give up their faith, and excuse them for it. Just a harsh warning: fear God, not your tormentors, because they can only kill you; he can throw you into hell.

Something is seriously wrong here, either with Jesus' teaching or with our assumptions. His words have a seriousness to them that we rarely consider. Christians today may give up faith because they did not get into the college they wanted, or because they did not get the romance they wanted, or the children they wanted, or the job they wanted, or because someone they love died prematurely, or just because they gradually slid away from walking with God. Yet Jesus does not offer reassurance even to those who apostatized to escape torture, or who gave up their faith to save their lives (or the lives of their children).

What could possibly justify such extreme demand? The obvious answer is that Jesus asks nothing of us that he did not do for us. We rightly remember not only his suffering and death – which he could have escaped at any time – but also our respective roles: we rightly cannot expect him to die for us (yet he did); as creator, lord, and savior, he can rightly expect us to die for him (so we must). While none of us is in danger of such adversity, we rightly recall that this pilgrimage we are on is intently serious, and demands our lives. While God often brings us blessing and comfort, he does not exist for our comfort; we exist for his service.

Day 4: Luke 12:6-7 We are never alone in our suffering.

Jesus balances the harshness of verses 4-5 with reassurance in verses 6-7. Our walk with God needs to make room for both words: the word of threat to us if we turn from God, but the word of gentle reassurance even in the face of circumstances that might otherwise push us away from God. No threat, no danger, no disappointment, no suffering need push us from God – we never need come under his wrath – because he cares for us through every circumstance.

He cares *for us*? Of course, he does. He even cares for the plainest, least valued birds: sparrows have unremarkable plumage, their song is not at all compelling, and they do not make a good meal. If God tracks them, surely he tracks us. God numbers even the hairs on our heads, which serve little good purpose; surely he is attentive to our living and dying, our prospering and our persecution. The promise here is not that God will keep us from persecution or suffering, but that he will care about us through it all, that suffering and misfortune do not indicate his neglect; they do not mean that we have fallen off his radar.

One of the stories to come out of Haiti after the earthquake is told by a Christian nurse on site when the quake struck Port-au-Prince. As she nursed the sick and dying throughout the night, from the surrounding fields there rose a steady stream of prayers and hymns of worship to God. Survivors not just grieving, but calling out to God, not in complaint, but in worship, calling on the God who was with them in their suffering. This is Jesus' promise: not that his followers will escape suffering, but that he will care for them through it. This is equally his promise to us.

Day 5: Luke 12:8-9 Reciprocation and Retribution

After the reassurance of 12:6-7, Jesus returns to the tenor and substance of his warning in 12:4-5, though he speaks more directly this time. He establishes an equivalence between this life and the next, between our willingness to own him in the face of opposition in this life, and his willingness to own us in the face of the final judgment at the end of life: acknowledge me, and I will acknowledge you; disown me, and I will disown you. Again, this is a sober warning, especially for us who cannot claim persecution as motive for turning from faith. Any opposition, mockery, or teasing that we face is so much milder than what Jesus' followers endured.

This is one of many reasons to for being part of a committed small group. In the face of hostility from others, strength can be gained from a group of like-minded, committed believers. Being part of a long-term small-group provides us a venue to care for others when they face hostility or opposition to their faith, and it provides others to care for us when we do.

Day 6: Luke 12:10-12 Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

Luke places this saying in a somewhat different context, and applies it in a somewhat different direction than Matthew and Mark. While they do not disagree, they do apply it differently. In Matthew 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-30, the saying appears in the context of Jesus' exorcism of a demon, which some of the crowd attributed to his mastery of dark powers: "It is by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons" (Matt 12:24). No, Jesus contends, it is by the power of the Spirit that I cast out demons (Matt 12:28). And anyone who blasphemes the Spirit of God – anyone who attributes the work of the Spirit through me to Satan – will never be forgiven.

Luke, on the other hand, applies the warning not to skeptics dismissing the miracles of Jesus, but to believers denying him under persecution. Not only does the Spirit empower Jesus to cast out demons, he also empowers Jesus' followers to withstand persecution: he gives them courage and the words to defend themselves and the gospel when they are called before political or religious tribunals at risk of death (Luke 12:11-12). To apostatize under those circumstances, then, is to blaspheme the Spirit, and will not be forgiven.

We want to be careful not to overstate this danger, or this warning. Many who have endured persecution speak of stumbling without falling, of renouncing faith under pain, but of subsequently recanting their renunciation, even though it led to long prison-terms. Many of us may experience some small measure of that, remaining silent about our faith when we have opportunity to speak, or turning from our faith temporarily under disappointment or pressure, especially when our faith is young or our context is adversarial. Jesus is not threatening us with hell for momentary stumbles, but he is warning us against renunciation of him.