

November 13, 2022

FIGHTING HYPOCRISY, FEAR, AND COVETOUSNESS

Luke 12:1-34

*(8 of 11 in a series through Luke 7-15)*

Don Carson has said that when his kids were young and they wanted to watch a television show that might have challenged the Christian worldview—like justifying stealing or the like (of course nothing lewd)—they would let them watch it on occasion. But they had to watch it as a family and have a discussion afterward. The reason that Carson did this is because he wanted to have to point out to his children elements in the show that they shouldn't support as believers, note how the show might have glamorized a behavior that was destructive, or the like. In other words, he wanted to guard his children from taking in and imitating the thoughts and actions that they were seeing.

It seems like the same kind of thing is happening in Luke 12:1-34. If you remember from last week, Jesus focused on the Pharisees and lawyers, rebuking them strongly. He declared clearly that in their state of rejecting the Son and pursuing their own rebellion, they were facing the wrath of God. And he gave a quite scathing word of condemnation. Well, when you start chapter twelve, you can see that his audience shifts. Luke opens the chapter, writing, "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 . . .*" (v. 1). He turns his focus from rebuking the Pharisees and lawyers to instructing his disciples. However, what he's going to teach his disciples is not disconnected from what he's just been saying to the Pharisees and lawyers. Let me show you what I mean.

Note how Jesus rebukes his opponents in the immediately preceding section (11:37-54) with acting hypocritically, being greedy, and pursuing greatness in man's eyes. He proclaims that they're like a cup that is clean on the outside but dirty on the inside, that they are "full of greed and wickedness" (v. 39), and that they love getting "the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces (v. 43). Thus, his disciples have just been captive to Jesus pointing to a group who are hypocritical, greedy, and seeking man's approval more than God's. So, what does Jesus do? He does what Don Carson did with his kids. He turns to his disciples in 12:1-34 and charges them not to be hypocritical, not to give in to greed and covetousness, and to fear God and not man. And as he speaks to his followers, we should put ourselves in their shoes and learn from what Jesus is teaching us as well. So, let's walk through his instructions to them. First, he tells us to beware of and fight hypocrisy.

**Beware of and fight hypocrisy**

Luke tells us that Jesus "began to say to his disciples *first*, 'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy'" (v. 1). Hypocrisy is the idea of presenting an image that is false. The Pharisees did this in that they attempted to look godly in all kinds of external ways, but within they were "full of greed and wickedness" (11:39). The lawyers did this in that they would "load

people with burdens hard to bear,” while not touching “the burdens with one of [their] fingers” (11:46). They would tell others what to do—suggesting this was good for all to do—while they themselves weren’t doing it. That is hypocrisy, and Jesus tells his disciples to beware of it, using the metaphor of leaven.

We usually speak of yeast instead of leaven, but it’s an element that you put in things like dough that will spread throughout the dough and cause it to rise. It seems, then, that Jesus uses this metaphor to suggest that the hypocrisy of the Pharisees can work like leaven in that it can spread to them in a subtle—even undetectable—kind of way. Therefore, they need to beware and on guard against living hypocritically.

But then Jesus gives us weapons to fight against hypocrisy by reminding us that those thoughts and actions that don’t match the way we present ourselves externally will be found out and exposed. He says, “Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 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” (vv. 2-3).<sup>1</sup>

Hypocrisy will be exposed. Though individuals think their secret rebellion is, well, *secret*, it will be exposed on the day of judgment. And, if you’re a child of God, the Lord may well show his love for you in exposing it in this age.

When we lived in Louisville, I remember hearing Ryan Fullerton, who pastored the church we were part of there, explaining how a man went to meet a woman with whom he was committing adultery, when—while he was meeting with her—his phone somehow called his wife, revealing his sin. And you know what that is called for the believer? Grace. You see, on the last day, the Lord will reveal our hearts—including the rebellion of those who profess to know Christ but don’t know him. But if you belong to Christ, the Lord may show his love for you by exposing your sin now so that you can repent and turn away from it.

Now, I know we brought up the issue of secret sins last week when we looked at Jesus exposing the hypocrisy of the lawyers, but here we are once more, and it may be because the Lord is giving all of us an opportunity in his mercy once more to confess our sins and turn from them—even if no one is aware of them. And if the Lord has exposed your sin, count it grace. I know it can make our heart race to think of our sin being exposed, but realize that the one who matters more—our Lord—knows it already, and he’s being gracious. And this nicely leads to our next point, fear God more than man.

## **Fear God more than man**

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<sup>1</sup> In Matthew’s gospel, Matthew connects this saying to the disciples being told to make known publicly what Jesus’ enemies are attempting to conceal, namely, that he is the Christ. But here Luke takes the same saying and connects it to the warning of hypocrisy. That is, he’s using it a bit differently than Matthew did, showing us that on the last day hypocrisy will be exposed.

As if Jesus knows that the idea of having our sin exposed before man might cause us more dread than knowing that God is aware of all that we do, Jesus begins the next section calling us to fear God instead of man. Then, he gives us a list of reasons not to fear man but fear God instead. *First, he tells us not to fear man because man can't ultimately harm us.* Jesus says, "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more than they can do" (v. 4).

Notice that Jesus isn't saying that he won't let others harm us. He acknowledges that men actually have the power to kill us. But his point is that this is *all* they can do. And my guess is that this would make no sense to most people in the world. Why in the world would you ever say, "All that person can do is kill me?" It makes you want ask, "Do you really know what killing you means?" It would only make sense if there's something worse than dying. And Jesus makes clear that there is indeed something worse than dying.

He continues, saying in verse 5, "But I warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him." You see, Jesus is reminding us, there is one to whom we'll have to answer on the day of judgment, and he has the authority not only to end our lives but then to cast us into hell—a place of eternal torment. As foolish as it would be for someone to fear getting in a fight with a toddler more than they fear getting in a fight with a trained killer, it is actually less foolish than it is to fear man more than we fear the God who can throw us into hell. Any time we want to run toward sin, it is always appropriate for us to feel the fear of God. And so Jesus is telling us not to pursue sin, motivated by our fear of man, but run from sin, motivated by our fear of God.

And any time that we feel the pull to want to deny him before the world, remember that if we deny him, he'll deny us. But if we acknowledge him, he'll acknowledge us in heaven. So, don't harden your heart against him and turn from him. That is what Jesus calls blaspheming against the Holy Spirit—or denying the witness of the Spirit. Jesus is saying that if you harden your heart and deny him as Lord (as the Spirit testifies he is), don't think all will be forgive and well on that last day. You must confess him as Lord and follow him in faith.

*Second, Jesus tells us not to fear man because God cares for us.* Right after telling us to fear God, Jesus tells us about how much the Lord cares for us. In other words, one reason we shouldn't elevate man's opinion of us over God's opinion is because God cares for us so well. He picks one of the most worthless creatures on the planet—a sparrow, five of which are sold for two pennies—and tells us that our Father watches over them and does not forget them. And we're of much more value to him than they are. He even has the hairs on our head numbered. So, why would we fear man when we have a heavenly Father who watches over us?

*Third, he tells us not to fear man because the Spirit will provide for us in our time of need.* In other words, we might feel the world's opposition to the Lord and attack of us and think, "I'll deny the Lord and follow the world because I don't know that I can endure the world's attacks." But Jesus is saying, "Don't worry. In that moment, when you're attacked the Spirit will give you what you need. He tells us, "Do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what

you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (vv. 11-12).

Here’s what we need to remember as we consider the persecution of the world. God is our ultimate judge, and his judgment is furious. So, it is foolish to deny him before men in order to save ourselves from the wrath of men when Jesus will simply deny us before God and we’ll bear his wrath. Conversely, if we confess him before men and bear their wrath, we can know the Father is watching over us, providing for us in that moment, *and* we’ll be spared the wrath of God as Jesus acknowledges us as his own.

Do you see how messed up it is to have such a fear of man when God is the one whose wrath is eternal, when our heavenly Father will care for us every step as we obey him, and when he’ll even give us words to say in those moments if we’re called before authorities on his behalf? Get these things in your heart now so that you’ll be equipped to obey as the persecution from the world grows worse. And, finally, Jesus tells us to guard against covetousness and anxiety.

### **Guard against covetousness and anxiety**

Luke tells us that (presumably as Jesus had just finished his previous point) someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me” (v. 13). What likely is going on here is not simply that one brother won’t give another what is rightfully his. It’s probably something more like one brother wanting to keep the family land together while another wants to sell it so that he can quickly get his share, or the like. And so this man is asking Jesus to tell the brother to take his approach. But Jesus isn’t interested in taking this brother’s side, saying, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you” (v. 14). But then Jesus uses the opportunity to warn against covetousness, saying to his disciples, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness” (v. 15a).

Covetousness is a desire to have what you don’t, perhaps as you see that another does have that very thing. And Jesus says that his followers must not be characterized as covetous. This is a sin we must kill. But how? Jesus gives us a few ways, so let’s take them one by one. *First, realize that life isn’t about all the things we have.* Right after his warning, Jesus says, “For one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (v. 15b).

Now, someone might point out that this isn’t very helpful because we already know that life isn’t about getting things. But the reality is that though you and I might say that we know that to be true, we can still be taken in by the lie that life does consist in those things. For example, when you see that someone has a good job, makes a lot of money, has a nice house, nice cars, nice clothes, and takes nice vacations, doesn’t the world generally say that’s a good life? And can’t you be tempted to see their money, house, car, clothes, or vacation and wish you had it? Well, ask why? Why do you want those things? Isn’t it because you think you’d be happier? Isn’t it because you’re valuing the quality of your life based on such possessions? That’s a moment to remind yourself that life isn’t merely the sum of our possessions. And I assure you there are miserable people who have all that you might desire. So, first, remind yourself that life isn’t

about the things we possess. But then, *second, remind yourself that your goal is to be rich toward God.*

Jesus tells a parable about a man whose land produced plentifully so that he had all kinds of crops and nowhere to store them because his barns weren't big enough. Therefore, he decided to tear down his barns and build larger ones to store it all. And he thought this a good plan because then he'd have all that he'd need for years, and he could sit back, relax, eat, drink, and be merry (v. 19). Then, the Lord declared that man a fool, for that very night he was going to die, and then all that he worked for to store up for his years of happiness would just go to someone else.

So, what's the problem? I mean, we might say, any of us could die at any moment, and this man couldn't know he would die that night. Perhaps had he known, he might have planned differently. But none of us knows when we will die, so what are we supposed to do? The answer is in verse 21, as Jesus says, "So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." We must pursue being rich toward God.

Here's the key. Don't make your aim in this life to lay up treasure for yourself. Now, of course, I'm not saying you can't have a nice car or home or the like. But don't let this be your aim or priority. Instead, make your priority to be rich toward God. And if you're saying, "I don't know what that means," that's okay because Jesus helps us by explaining it in the next section of the text. So, I want to jump to the end of that section first so that we might understand it.

Jesus uses the image in verses 33-34 of providing yourself with treasure in heaven, saying, "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourself with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Here Jesus is showing us how to be rich toward God.

Jesus is saying, if you were to sit down and write up a list of things you want to accomplish or attain for yourself with your money, you'd put a number one and write out beside it, "Store up treasure in heaven." You want to make sure that you're giving to the Lord's kingdom, to the church in order to line up with Jesus' mission of making disciples of all nations. You want to care for the needy so that you're loving your neighbor as yourself. Then, after that, numbers two through ten can be about getting a house, car, paying for college or the like. But if we prioritize possessions in this world over treasure in the next, we're fools, because one day we're all going to die—and it could be soon—and we'll have eternity before us. And do you think you'll say on that day, "I wish I'd put a little more into my house than caring for my brother in need or making sure we could carry out the mission Christ gave us as a church"? Certainly not.

Additionally, if we make our priority investment in the Lord and his work, then it'll orient our hearts toward him, whereas if we make our priority getting possessions here, they'll eventually pull our hearts away from him for where our treasure is, there will our hearts be. And this leads

us to our third way to fight covetousness and pursue being rich toward God: *remember how much your Father loves you.*

In this next section, Jesus begins by addressing anxiety over the things of this world. That is, he realizes that many might hear his warning against covetousness and exhortation to pursue riches toward God instead and think, “But my deal isn’t wanting a nicer house or car. I’m just worried where this month’s groceries are coming from.” But the reality is, just as longing for more possessions can lead one away from pursuing riches toward God, we can use our anxiety over things that we need to do the same. But Jesus tells us that this isn’t worthy of being our priority in life either. Just as many people justify not investing in the Lord’s work with their income because they say, “I need this money to survive” as refuse because they say, “I just want to get a nicer house and car.” And we’ve already addressed the one, so let’s address the other. And the key here is remembering how much God loves you. Let’s see why.

First, Jesus points us to ravens. He says, “Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!” (v. 24). Interestingly, Jesus chooses one of the nastiest birds as his example. Ravens are black birds that are bigger and uglier than crows, and sound even worse than them. So, if you’re not familiar with the raven, just imagine a crow, and then imagine it uglier and worse sounding. These birds are among the birds that will find some dead animal that’s been smashed on the road and eat it. And Jesus is telling us that when we see that disgusting scene on the road, he wants us to think to ourselves, “My Father provided that food for that nasty bird, and if he’s willing to do that, how much more is he going to provide for me?”

Then, Jesus asks us to consider the futility of anxiety. You can’t get all worked up and make yourself live one hour longer in life, he tells us. So, if you can’t do something like that by worrying, then don’t let anxiety over these things grip and control your life. And then he tells us to think about lilies.

He notes that lilies are flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow. Moreover, there’s nothing they do to make sure they’re beautiful. And yet, the Lord has decided that he’s going to array them with more glory than even Solomon had. Why? He just likes doing that for lilies. And you’re much more important than lilies, so do you think that the one who owns all the earth and the things therein is going to say, “I just don’t think I want to provide for my child for whom I sent my Son to die for?” That’s preposterous.

So, yes, get a job, go to work, and work unto the Lord. Be responsible. But don’t let anxiety grip you and control your life, especially to the point that you think, “I can’t afford to seek the kingdom as my priority and invest my money there because I’m worried I won’t have all I need.” If you do that, you’re as foolish as the man who built bigger and bigger barns. One day you’ll die, and on that day you won’t think, “I wished I’d held onto my money tighter so that I knew I’d have all I needed instead of investing in the Lord’s kingdom.” I promise you that you won’t say that. So, seek first his kingdom, realize how much he loves you and wants to care for you, and trust and obey him. And if you happen to lose sight of how much he loves you and desires to meet

your needs, just remember that when your need was the greatest he sent his Son to live, die, and be raised for you. So, let's come to the table now to remember that and give thanks to him, as we declare our trust in him. Amen.