

**“Fear Him!” (Luke 12:1–12)**

**April 7, 2019**

**Brian Watson**

Let me start with a question: What is your biggest fear? What are you most afraid of? Take a moment to think about it. Chapman University conducts an annual survey of American fears. Here are some of the results in 2018’s survey:

73.6 percent were afraid of corrupt government officials.  
61.6 percent and 60.7 percent were afraid of pollution of bodies of water and pollution of drinking water, respectively.  
57 percent were afraid of not having enough money for the future.  
56.5 percent were afraid of “people I love becoming seriously ill.”  
56.4 percent of people were afraid of “people I love dying.”

As you go down the list, you see other items that aren’t surprising: about half of people are afraid of terrorism and wars, a significant number of people are afraid of accidents, and people are increasingly concerned about privacy issues related to personal data and identity theft. Surprisingly, only 27.9 percent said they were afraid of dying and 23.7 percent said they were afraid of hell. Even more surprisingly, only 8.4 percent said they were afraid of zombies, 8.3 percent said they were afraid of ghosts, and 7.1 percent said they were afraid of clowns.<sup>1</sup>

I think most people are afraid of embarrassment, pain, and loss. A lot of people are afraid of public speaking—26.2 percent in that survey—because they’re afraid they’ll be embarrassed. People are often afraid of what others will think about them. People are afraid of physical and emotional pain, which could come from accidents, terrorist attacks, abuse, and deaths. And people are afraid of loss—loss of money, loss of sensitive personal data, loss of a job, loss of a relationship, loss of loved ones, and loss of life. Those fears are all understandable, and some of us in this room have had some big fears realized in our lives.

What someone fears tells you a lot about what a person values. So, what do you fear the most? And what does that say about you?

I bring this issue of fear up because in the passage that we’re studying today, Luke 12:1–12, Jesus tells us who we should not fear, and who we should. And since Jesus is the Christ, or Messiah, and the Son of God, I think we should pay attention to what he has to say about fear.

---

<sup>1</sup> Chapman University Survey of American Fears Wave 5, “The Complete List of Fears, 2018,” [https://www.chapman.edu/wilkinson/research-centers/babbie-center/\\_files/fear-2018/Complete-Fears-2018-ranked.pdf](https://www.chapman.edu/wilkinson/research-centers/babbie-center/_files/fear-2018/Complete-Fears-2018-ranked.pdf), accessed on April 6, 2019.

We've been studying the Gospel of Luke for a while now, and we're in the period of Jesus' life when he's teaching and when he's starting to have more and more conflict with the Jewish religious leaders of his day, in particular the Pharisees. Last week, in Luke 11:37–54, we saw that Jesus criticized the Pharisees and the religious legal scholars because of their hypocrisy. This week, we see Jesus warn his disciples not to become like the Pharisees, and to think very carefully about how they will live. And he says that who we fear will dictate how we live.

Let's begin by reading the first three verses of Luke 12:

<sup>1</sup> 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 first, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. <sup>2</sup> Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. <sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup>

Last week, at the very end of Luke 11, we read that the Pharisees and the scribes were plotting to trap Jesus, to trip him up and cause him to say something that would condemn him. Of course, they couldn't succeed in doing that, because Jesus spoke perfectly. He answered all their insincere questions in ways that shut them down.

But as they were scheming, Jesus kept drawing crowds. Luke tells us that thousands of people gathered around Jesus, so much that they were "trampling one another." And I'm sure it was his recent criticism of the Pharisees plus the large crowds that led him to warn his disciples about becoming like the Pharisees. He tells them to beware of the "leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." In the Jewish context, "leaven" was a bit of fermented dough which could taint a whole lump of dough. A little bit of leaven, like yeast, can affect a large lump of dough.

It's interesting that the apostle Paul also uses the phrase, "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" a couple of times in his letters. In 1 Corinthians 5, he warns the church about allowing sin to continue in the church (1 Cor. 5:6–8). In Galatians 5:9, Paul warns Christians not to try to earn a right standing with God by obedience to the old covenant law, the law that God gave Israel at Mount Sinai (Gal. 5:9). In the *Didache*, an early Christian document from the end of the first century (or beginning of the second century), it says, "Throw out, therefore, the bad leaven, which has become stale and sour, and reach for the new leaven, which is Jesus Christ. Be

---

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

salted with him, so that none of you become rotten, for by your odor you will be examined.”<sup>3</sup> Then it makes it clear that the old leaven in mind is Judaism, specifically adherence to the old covenant. While the meaning of the phrase is different in each context, the saying shows that certain ways of doing things are not compatible with Christianity. Hypocrisy, outrageous and damaging sin, and the old covenant are not compatible with the way of Jesus.

In this case, Jesus is warning against the Pharisees’ hypocrisy. Jesus’ twelve disciples might be tempted, in order to please a large crowd, to act one way in public while they lived a different way in private. They might have been tempted to lead double lives, and Jesus warns them about that. Nothing that is covered up will not be revealed. Whatever is in the dark will come to the light. That’s true of the Pharisees’ hypocrisy. It’s true of Christians who are hypocrites. And it’s also true of Jesus’ identity and the truth of the Christian message. All that is true will be revealed in the end, when Jesus returns to this world and there is a day of judgment, a day of reckoning. What is inside a person will be laid bare, exposed before God. There will be no fooling God, for he knows everything about us. And the truth about Jesus will be undeniable, because we will stand before him in his glory. And it’s Jesus that we should most concerned about, not what the crowds think and what the crowds approve.

Let’s now read verses 4–7:

<sup>4</sup>“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. <sup>5</sup> But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! <sup>6</sup> Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. <sup>7</sup> Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Again, Jesus must have the Pharisees and crowds in mind when he tells his disciples not to fear people, but to fear God instead. The Pharisees would prove hostile to Jesus, and Jesus knew that those who hated him will hate his followers. The Roman Empire was largely hostile to Christianity, too. In time, many of the original disciples would die for their faith. Others, like Stephen (Acts 7), James (Jesus’ brother), and Paul would die for their faith. Later in this Gospel of Luke, Jesus will tell the twelve that before the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in the year 70, they would be persecuted (Luke 21:12). So, that people had the power to kill the bodies

---

<sup>3</sup> Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 157.

of the disciples is not some empty rhetoric. This was something that would happen to many, though not all of them.

Even though that threat of persecution was real, Jesus tells his followers not to fear people. The worst that people can do is kill you. Instead, fear God, who has the ability to cast you into hell. This is the only time that Luke uses that word, hell, which is literally Gehenna (Greek: γέεννα). It's a reference to where people are punished after that great day of judgment. The name comes from a physical location, a valley south of Jerusalem called "the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom." It's a place where wicked Israelites had sacrificed their children to a false god, an idol named Molech (2 Kgs. 23:10; 2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6; Jer. 7:31–32; 19:4–6; 32:34–35). These were burnt sacrifices: the children were burned. So, the image of Gehenna is a place associated with wickedness and burning, but it came to be used of people who would be condemned by God, cut off from him and everything that is good forever. The book of Revelation calls it the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10–15). But the torment of hell is far greater than fire, and sometimes it's called "outer darkness" (Matt. 8:12). In either case, whether the image is fire or darkness, hell is an awful fate, something far worse than we can imagine, and it's a fate reserved for those who reject have sinned against God—which is all of us—and who don't embrace Jesus.

Essentially, Jesus is telling his followers not to worry about the masses of people who don't have real power. Worry about God, who has our eternal destiny in his hands. And if you belong to God, you are valuable. God knows and cares about small things like sparrows, which apparently were things that the poorest people would buy to eat, and even the number of hairs on your head. He knows these things and he cares about such little details. And if he cares about such little things, how much more will he care for his children. If you trust in Jesus, believing that he is who the Bible says he is and that he has done what the Bible says he has done, the worst fate you can experience is rejection by others, torture, and death. But you will live with Jesus forever in a perfect world, a renewed and restored creation in which there is nothing bad—no hunger or pain, no diseases or wars, and no death. But if you live to please the masses instead of God, you will have an unending experience of decay, torment, isolation. You'll be permanently trapped in darkness, something like solitary confinement—but far worse, and without a moment of relief.

Jesus says that everyone who has ever lived will fall into two camps: they will embrace him or deny him. Let's look at verses 8–12:

<sup>8</sup>“And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, <sup>9</sup>but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. <sup>10</sup>And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>11</sup>And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, <sup>12</sup>for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

Those who acknowledge Jesus will be acknowledged by God. Those who deny Jesus will be denied by God. When Jesus says “acknowledge,” he doesn't mean that those who know Jesus lived will go to heaven when they die. The devil knows Jesus is alive. Knowing facts about Jesus is not what he has in mind. Acknowledging Jesus means knowing who he is and responding appropriately. We talk of faith or belief. If you believe that Jesus is Lord and God, you will trust that he is a good King, and you will come under his rule. If you believe that Jesus is the Savior, you will trust that he is the only one who can make you right with God, who can take care of your sins so that they are wiped away and who can credit you with his righteousness so that God will regard you as having done what is right and good. If you trust Jesus, you will not only obey him and believe in his work on your behalf, but you'll love him.

Jesus even forgives those who have spoken against him. Look at verse 10 again: “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.” If we take this verse out of context, we might be confused and even very afraid. But we have the rest of the New Testament to help us make sense out of what Jesus was saying. We can even think about specific cases. Think about one of Jesus' disciples, Peter. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. But after he became aware of what he had done, he had great sorrow, and he repented. He turned back to Jesus. He was forgiven. Think of Paul. Paul was a Pharisee who first had persecuted Christians. He surely spoke against Jesus many times. But when he saw the truth about Jesus, he was changed. He was forgiven. Those who had spoken against Jesus and turn back to him are forgiven. And that turning back to him must occur in this life.

On the other hand, those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus says this, he says in the context of people believing that his

miracles were performed by the power of Satan. So, it appears that speaking against the Holy Spirit means ascribing his power to the devil. But the Holy Spirit does other things besides empowering people to perform miracles. The Holy Spirit later empowers the disciples to preach the good news about Jesus. We see that in the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit leads some of those apostles, and others like Luke, to write the books of the New Testament. Denying the Holy Spirit means denying the gospel, denying God's word. And not just denying once. Paul denied the gospel message for a while. But he repented and put his faith in Jesus. Jesus must have in mind those who continue to deny the work of the Holy Spirit, even to their deaths. If you continually deny God's activity, which comes through the work of the Holy Spirit, throughout your life, there is not hope for you. And as we've seen in Luke's Gospel, to deny God all you have to do is be apathetic about Jesus. Denying God may not look like hostility. It may look like a shrug and indifference.

Perhaps Jesus has something more specific in mind in the context of this passage. He might mean that the disciples might be tempted to change what they believe in the context of persecution. When the masses turn against them, and the powers that be are threatening their lives, they may be tempted to deny Jesus, to change their tune. That's why Jesus says, in verses 11 and 12, not to be anxious about what will happen when they stand before Jewish and Roman authorities. In that day, the Holy Spirit will teach them what they are to say.

Later in Luke's Gospel, shortly before his death, Jesus teaches the disciples that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed. The Roman Empire did this in the year 70, about forty years later. And Jesus tells his disciples this, in Luke 21:12–19:

<sup>12</sup> But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. <sup>13</sup> This will be your opportunity to bear witness. <sup>14</sup> Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, <sup>15</sup> for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. <sup>16</sup> You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. <sup>17</sup> You will be hated by all for my name's sake. <sup>18</sup> But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup> By your endurance you will gain your lives.

Jesus says that they will be persecuted. He doesn't sugar coat things for his followers. He says that some of the twelve would die for their faith, and yet, not a hair of their head would perish. Of course, he didn't mean that literally. He just said some of them would die. But that's the

worst that could happen to them. And, in light of eternal bliss, what is a bit of momentary pain? It's nothing. It's better to have momentary pain and eternal joy than to deny Jesus and have eternal torment. And in that context, Jesus says, "Don't worry. Don't think about what you'll say. The Holy Spirit will be with you, and he'll take care of you."

Some Christians have used this to say that when we share our faith with others, we shouldn't think in advance what we'll say. But that's not what context of this passage. When we tell people the gospel, we should prepare. We should study. We should know what we believe. We should learn how to communicate it well. We should learn how non-Christians think, what their questions are, and what their objections to Christianity are. Jesus is not excusing laziness and anti-intellectualism. Just last night, I was reading a portion of a new book on apologetics, which is a rational presentation or defense of the Christian faith. At the beginning of the book, there's a reference to recent surveys which suggest that young people are leaving the church because the church is often anti-intellectual.<sup>4</sup> Jesus is not saying, "Don't think. Don't prepare in advance what you'll say in any given situation." If that were so, all my sermons would be extemporaneous, and they would be pretty lousy.

But Jesus is talking about the context of persecution, when your life is being threatened. He's talking about a situation in which an authority, who has the power to throw you in prison or kill you, is pressing you to deny Jesus. And Jesus says, "Don't worry."

Maybe you've never thought about what you would do in that situation. I have. I have thought about it because I've studied enough history to know that people have been martyred. People have been pressured to give up their faith. We will likely see this more and more in this country. We won't see Christians get the death penalty. More likely, we'll see Christians being refused employment, losing their jobs because of their faith. A relatively small number of Christians will die each year for the faith. But many more will be beaten, imprisoned, robbed, fired, or cut off from family.

If your life was on the line, would you deny Jesus or continue to believe in him? Settle it in your minds, right now. But don't worry about what you would say in that moment. Just focus on Jesus, and the right words will come.

---

<sup>4</sup> Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 13. This observation is made by J. P. Moreland in his foreword to the book.

When I think about this issue, I think about a recent movie by Martin Scorsese, called *Silence*. Scorsese is a Catholic, and I don't know what he truly believes. But the film is thought-provoking and it's worth seeing. It's based on a novel which is rooted in history. In this story, some Jesuit priests travel from Portugal to Japan in the seventeenth century to check up on another Jesuit priest, a missionary who has disappeared. In Japan, the priests witness Japanese Christians being tortured and killed for their faith. The Japanese government pressured Christians to renounce their faith by stepping on images of Jesus called *fumi-e*. If I remember the film correctly, Christians were also forced to spit on the cross. If they didn't perform these physical acts of renunciation, they would die. The film doesn't present great theology, but it raises a lot of interesting questions, and it gets you to think about what you would do if you were in that situation. Settle it in your mind to believe in Jesus to the end, never to renounce him. But don't worry about what you will say.

Now that we've looked at this passage, I want us to think a bit more about fearing God.

One thing we must realize is that there will always be a temptation to change what we believe in the face of public pressure. There will always be a large amount of people who believe things that aren't biblical. And this creates tension for Christians. Do we yield to the masses, or do we continue to believe what Jesus taught? Do we give in to public pressure, or do we remain faithful?

This is a question the apostles had to deal with. It's one that the apostle Paul knew well. And he often had to confront false beliefs. About four years ago, I preached through the book of Galatians. You can find all of those sermons online at our website, by going to [wbcommunity.org/galatians](http://wbcommunity.org/galatians). In that letter, Paul was confronting false beliefs taught by others, who were teaching that in order for Gentiles to become Christians, they first had to obey all of the law of the old covenant. Specifically, men had to be circumcised. And Paul said that that message was not the gospel. The gospel is that we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone, and this is a gift from God. It's not based on our doing, but on God's doing. Yet these false teachers were persuasive, and Christians were starting to change their beliefs. And that's why Paul writes these words (in Galatians 1:6–10):

<sup>6</sup>I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—<sup>7</sup> not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

<sup>8</sup> But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary

to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. <sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

<sup>10</sup> For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Paul is saying that there is only one gospel message. There is only one message about Jesus, about how to be reconciled to God through Jesus, and it's the message that has been preached since Jesus died and rose from the grave. There is only one gospel. And he says that even if he changes his message, and even if an angel comes to them and tells them a different message, not to believe that person. He says that false messenger will be condemned. And then he says he is not trying to please men, but to please God. If he was trying to please others, he would change his message based on public opinion. But if he was trying to please God, he would hold fast to the truth.

Paul could have used the language of fearing God. He could have said, "Do I fear man or God? If I feared man, I wouldn't be a servant of Christ. I would say what people want to hear. But if I fear God, I must tell the truth that God revealed to me."

The fact is that public opinion does not decide the truth. Everyone could believe something was true and they could still be wrong. There was a time when everyone thought the sun orbited around the Earth, instead of the other way around. They were wrong. The truth doesn't change based on what others think. So, 99 percent of people could believe that something is true, and they could still believe a lie. The truth never changes. It doesn't care about what we think or how we feel. The truth is what is real, and we don't get to decide what is real. We may be tempted to question the truth of the Bible because others don't believe what we believe. We'll be tempted to alter the Bible's message because it is offensive to some. But if what the Bible teaches is true, then to deny its message is to deny the Holy Spirit. And if we persist in that, we will be cut off from God.

So, I urge you to cling to the truth. Do that because you love Jesus. Do that because you fear God.

Some people don't like that phrase, "fear God." What does that even mean? Does it mean being frightened by God, being afraid of him? I think, in part, that is the case. If we understand exactly who God is, and if we understand our sin, we may be frightened. God is perfect. He is wholly other. He is above and beyond his creation. God doesn't have a body, but it's helpful to

think that God is bigger than the universe. He has more power than all the energy in the universe. Have you ever seen the power of nature unleashed? Have you been in an earthquake? Have you witnessed a hurricane or a tornado, or even a powerful thunderstorm? Even if you've only seen those things in videos, you get some sense of God's power. God is not to be trifled with.

And if you realize that you have often failed to live for God, not seeking to live life on his terms, not seeking to do what pleases him, but often ignoring him, avoiding him, and certainly not loving him, then you start to get a sense of the offense of your sin. If you really know God, you'll start to see the ugliness of your sin. And if you know God and your sin, there should be a bit of fear in you—not a paralyzing fear, but a healthy fear. Sadly, this fear is lacking. In the survey I referred to earlier, only 14.2 percent of people said that they feared God.

But God invites us to become his friends. It's interesting to see that Jesus calls his disciples friends (in verse 4) in the context of fearing God. We must have a healthy sense of awe in the presence of God, but we can also be Jesus' friend. We can be his friend if we trust him. Jesus came to bring us to God. Jesus came to destroy the work of the devil (1 John 3:8) and to remove our fear of death. He did that by becoming like us. Jesus is the Son of God who has always existed, yet who, over two thousand years ago, also became a man. And he experienced temptation and suffering. He knows what it's like to obey God, to fear him in a healthy way. And though Jesus never sinned—and he's the only human who has never sinned and who never had the power of sin at work in him—he died by crucifixion. He died on the cross, an instrument of suffering and shame, reserved for enemies of the state, not because he was guilty, but because we are. His perfect righteousness is credited to those who trust him. And his death wiped away the record of sin of those who embrace him. If you trust Jesus, you don't have to fear the crowds. And you don't have to fear death. This is what the author of Hebrews tells us:

<sup>14</sup> Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup> and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery (Heb. 2:14–15).

Fear of public opinion and death is a kind of slavery. And Jesus came to break those chains. If we trust him, there is nothing to fear but God. And that fear of God is a healthy fear, a sense of awe and wonder and love. Jesus was able to endure the cross because he had a healthy fear of his Father. If we trust Jesus and have that healthy fear, we can endure whatever suffering

we may face. And if we do that, God will acknowledge us. He will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21, 23).

If you fear God, turn to Jesus and trust him, and you will live forever. If you fear humans, you will be enslaved forever. The choice is yours.