

Following Jesus

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn back to Luke's Gospel Chapter 12 and look at the passage there. I still think we've got a little bit to go in terms of our body language, when we sing.

I would really love if there was a big mirror there, you could all see yourselves. I really do because sometimes I'm sure you're just bursting in your heart to praise God, but sometimes it certainly doesn't look like it. I know God looks at our hearts, and that's what I'm going to be talking about, so maybe I'm contradicting myself.

But I think it is good to give the impression at least that you are happy and praising Him and joyful. That's something maybe from our tradition we need to work at a little bit.

I'm not looking for slapstick singing or false smiles, but just body language sometimes, it does speak about our hearts. Anyway, enough of that.

Luke's Gospel Chapter 12, the next section of this Gospel that we're looking at together. I had a privilege this week of having lunch with someone who was very, very high up in investment management until a couple of months ago.

[1 : 16] He was probably one of the most senior management of one of the biggest investment companies in the world. His timing of getting out of the business was legendary, because he seems to have missed this massive credit crunch to a greater or lesser degree.

But we had a great time talking about what's happening in the world economy at the moment. One thing he said was very interesting, and it stuck with me in terms of the theme of this passage. He said, all investment, well, speaking broadly, he would say most investment, certainly, is motivated by two things, it's motivated by fear and by greed.

He says, that's how the stock exchange and that's how the investment brokers and the speculators work. Surprisingly, we would expect the kind of most kind of mathematical and rational people to be the people that are investing and are speculating.

But he says it's a massively emotional business, and the people that are investing are emotionally acting on hunches, and a lot of it is to do with fear and to do with greed.

And I thought that was very interesting, because these are two areas in terms of religion, in terms of Christianity, that Jesus highlights in this section, there's fear and there's greed.

[2 : 37] And he doesn't pull any punches. That's another thing that's great about Jesus Christ in his preaching and in his teaching, that he really doesn't pull any punches. And what's interesting is that he's massively popular in his day, despite what he's saying.

In verse 1 we're told that a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so much so that they were trampling on each other. So that would be great today, wouldn't it, if someone came to hear the word of God and they were trampling over each other to get, it's not a problem that we face. Jesus was incredibly popular, but he was absolutely honest in his teaching. And indeed as he taught more, people began to filter away from him because they didn't like the kind of honesty with which he was exposing the listener's hearts.

But it's great to look at that and be challenged by that today, and I hope that we are challenged by these two things, that Jesus is the theme of Jesus' message here.

Fear and greed. In the first section, verses 1 to 12, he's really talking about fear, and he's speaking to his disciples.

[3 : 49] In verse 1 we're told that Jesus began to speak first to his disciples. There's a great crowd there, but Jesus spoke to his disciples first.

So right from the very beginning, there's a division within the crowd that's implied by Jesus, isn't it? There is this big crowd here, but Jesus speaks first of all to his disciples.

He knows there's other people there, but those who are his followers, he speaks to. And that's very interesting because it's a blunt point or two the rest of his message. Because the rest of his message is speaking about the need to be a follower and the need to put your trust in Jesus Christ. And that is very interesting, isn't it? That Jesus immediately knows to whom he wants to speak, and he gives this pointer towards his message. And I would simply ask today in a much smaller, much more humble, gathering of people together, what about you?

When Jesus speaks through his word, through the Bible today, through his message, are you one of his disciples that he's speaking to? Or are you simply part of the crowd? I hope that's challenging because it's not a challenge really from me.

[5 : 01] It's a challenge that comes out of this passage. That there can be lots of people speaking or listening to Jesus, but are you listening as someone just part of the crowd really, or are you a disciple?

And Christ really goes on to speak to his disciples and challenge them. And he speaks to them about whether they're afraid of people. In that first section, Jesus warns them to be, the disciples to be on their guard against the use of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

He goes on to say that everything will be made clear, even the whispers of things that are said in the quiet. Then he says, don't be afraid of those who kill the body, and so on. So he's asking the disciples, because some of the disciples were afraid to say that they were disciples of Jesus.

And they were particularly afraid because of the religious leaders, the Pharisees. Because if you said you were a disciple of Jesus, then they would throw you out of the synagogue. And they were afraid to belong to Jesus.

They were afraid to confess Jesus as their Lord and as their Savior. And so they would whisper quietly about what Jesus was saying. But no one heard what they were saying, because they were afraid of people.

[6 : 14] They were afraid of confessing before the Pharisees. They were more afraid of people in the Pharisees than they were of Jesus and of God. And Jesus wants to address that.

And he speaks about the yeast of the Pharisees. And that was just really the teaching of the Pharisees, which was saying, it doesn't matter what you're like in your heart, really, as long as you're right outwardly.

As long as you do the right things outwardly. And as long as other people think you're holy and good with God. And it's a very interesting question for us to consider.

And as to consider as Christians, are we more afraid of what other people think of us? And is our Christianity more in line with what other people think of our Christianity, rather than what God thinks of us in our heart and what God knows about us?

Now can I ask you a very, very challenging question? As a Christian, can I ask you, would you sin if you thought you could get away with it?

[7 : 23] If you thought God didn't know or couldn't see it, or wouldn't judge it, and you thought nobody else would find out about it, would you sin?

I think that's a very interesting question with regard to being more afraid of people than of God. And I'm going to explain what I mean by being afraid of God in a minute.

But in other words, are we more afraid of getting found out than we are of offending our Saviour when we sin? And it certainly gets to the very core of my heart, that question.

Are we more concerned about what people think of our Christianity? And it would be terrible, oh no, if they found out what I'm thinking in my heart, or what I did, or what I'm like, what would they think of me?

But is that our motivating factor in living our Christian lives, or is it offending God? And I do believe that's what God is getting to the bottom of here, because He wants to challenge His own disciples to move beyond that and to look at who God is Himself.

[8 : 26] So He says, okay, you're afraid of the Pharisees, you're afraid of other people. What about God, He says? What do you think about God? And He goes on and explains a little bit more about God.

He says there's nothing hidden from God. I tell you, my friends, or in verse 3, He says, what you've said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, what you whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.

And He's reminding us there that really God knows our hearts, and God knows exactly what's in our hearts. And one day our hearts and our motivations will all be revealed, and we will know, and everyone will know, and His judgments will be clear that we're there for all to see, so that people will know what we really have thought of God and what place God has in our hearts.

So all will be revealed. In other words, God is saying, look, I know, and so therefore I am more important than the Pharisees, for example, or for other people, because they can't see your hearts. And He goes on to say, what do you think of God? Because God is going to be your judge in verse 4 and 5. He speaks about that. Don't be afraid of those who just can, at best, bring you to martyrdom if you take it to an extreme, you can kill the body.

[9 : 40] But He says, show, I will show you Him who you should fear, fear Him who after the killing of the body has power to throw you into hell. It's again, you know, I think God is, Jesus here is using very expressive and strong and provocative language, and He's saying, look, people have no power over your eternal destination.

Whether you go to heaven or hell, He says, God is the only one through me, Jesus Christ, who opens the door to heaven. I am the way, He says, the truth in the life. And He is also the one who judges and condemns to a lost eternity.

And again, it's this whole question that we've seemed to have been looking at again and again over these last weeks about realigning our thinking towards God and to where God is and what God says.

And Jesus is here saying, gentle Jesus, you know, meek and mild, the lovely Jesus that the crowds followed, He says, there is an eternity. There is a life beyond this and that future life beyond the grave is in God's domain.

And He is the one that has the decision making over that. And if we reject Him, then we reject the hope of living in heaven with Him. And if we reject this particular teaching, well, I don't like that.

[10 : 55] Then let's just reject it all. You know, why do we pick and choose? Are we just going to be going out like going into a box of chocolates and saying, I only take the ones I like?

Is that what we're going to do? I say, we leave out all the rest. Kind of bad forest gump thing, sir. Sorry. You can't really go into forest gump in the middle of a sermon.

But, you know, are we going to do that? Are we going to just pick the bits that we like from God, you know, and then leave out the bits that come under His own authority as well? And He says about the one who has the decision making power to cast into hell.

Are we just going to ignore that because it doesn't fit with our 21st century sensibilities? Or are we going to listen to His word? You know, are you sure yourself if you die tomorrow where you're going to go?

Or are you living your life in fear of what other people think of you and what their opinion is of you rather than God? Because God alone is the one who has the power over life and over death and over heaven and over hell.

[12 : 02] So it's very solemn and very serious teaching to ask us to get a grip of ourselves and to move in line with His claims. But at the same time, memory is speaking to His disciples and He says, Look, I love and I care for my people. And He goes on to say that after talking about fearing Him.

He goes on to say, Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies yet? Not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid, you're worth more than many sparrows. He's giving them words of comfort after saying, Look, don't be afraid of the farthest season of other people.

He says, Don't be afraid because I'm going to care for you. I care for you much more than you even understand. It's a reminder to them. I think I've said this before.

I think there's 365 times in the Bible that the Bible says, Don't be afraid. One for every day. Don't be afraid, He says, because we have the minute love and care of God when we're His disciples.

You see, in the temple, and He uses this picture of the sparrows, there was bog-off deals, buy one, get one free, or rather it was buy four and get one free, because two sparrows were sold for a penny.

[13 : 15] So for two pennies, you get four sparrows, but you get one free. So they were kind of worthless little birds, and they were for the very poorest of people who couldn't sacrifice anything else. They didn't have any money to sacrifice anything else.

So they bought these very cheap deals and bought these sparrows to sacrifice, and God says, I know all about them. Not one of them is forgotten by me. And He says, the hairs of your head are all numbered.

Now He actually means the hairs of your head are all labelled. That's the word. It's not just that they're numbered, but they're labelled. Which, you know, is just a picture.

It's an illustration, isn't it, of intricacy and of knowledge, intimate knowledge of us. So He says, listen, don't be afraid. This sovereign God, whose power over the universe, power over your eternal destiny, is interested in your protection, who loves you, cares for you.

He's a massive God, but He is a powerful God, but He's intimately interested in you. And we see that, obviously, in Jesus Christ. And then He goes on to say, you know, His Spirit is a double-edged sword, and He speaks about His Holy Spirit in verses 8 and 10, probably the one who saw Him bits of the whole Bible.

[14:27] I don't have time really to go into it today, but He speaks about the unforgivable sin, which is sinning against the Holy Spirit. And then He also says to the disciples, don't be afraid of what you're going to say, because the Holy Spirit will teach you.

So there's a double-edged sword there for the Spirit, isn't there? It's positive and negative. The Holy Spirit is given to live in the hearts of every believer, and He's there to comfort us and help us.

And when we're given an opportunity to witness, maybe when we're before the synagogue, well, we'll not be before the synagogues, but when maybe we're given an opportunity to witness for Christ, He'll give us the words to say, and we're not to be afraid.

It's great, it's a comfort, it's a friend. But, He says, I think as He looks up to the wider crowd, don't resist Him, because that's the unforgivable sin.

In other words, if you continue to reject the Holy Spirit's promptings, who's pointing this to Jesus, and who teaches about Jesus, and who shows us Jesus, and who invites us to Jesus, because that's His work.

[15:31] If you keep saying, no, I'm not going to believe, I'm not going to trust, I'm not going to submit myself to Jesus Christ. I don't want Him to be Lord over me. If we keep on saying that, then God can never forgive us.

He can never forgive us. We've committed the unforgivable sin, because we never seek forgiveness. Against Him, and against Him, and against Him, and He's saying, no, no, no.

He says, that is what cannot be forgiven. So the Holy Spirit is a double-edged sword. So in that teaching, Christ really concludes the whole passage about being afraid of people.

He says, rather, don't be afraid of people but fear God. In verse 5, you've got a fear hymn, sandwich, it starts, but I show you whom you will fear. And then at the end of the verse, He says, yes, I tell you, fear Him.

And we've seen that before, haven't we, from the Bible, from Jesus' teaching especially, when He repeats something, it's very important. So He says it twice in the space of, well, it wasn't one verse to Him, but it's one verse to us, one sentence.

[16:33] He says it twice. And isn't it interesting that in the same passage, He says, fear Him, but He also says, don't be afraid. So you can see there's a difference, isn't there?

He doesn't want us to be afraid of God. You know, a kind of terrible fear, and we're intimidated by Him in that sense, but rather fear in the sense of reverential submission, recognising His grace and His love and our need.

You know, in the same way that you fear live wire, and live electric wire, you're afraid in a kind of, yeah, reverential way, because, you know, the power of electricity is very great.

If you're going to stick your finger in it, you're going to get blown away. Same kind of idea of the fear of the sea. You know, we have a respect for the sea, because it's really powerful, and we don't just walk into it, we're stronger.

And it's that kind of recognition of the power of God, yet in a unique way, the love of God for us as well, it follows faith. When we put our trust in Jesus, when we recognise what Jesus has done from an outstanding love that He has for us, then we fear God in a reverential and in a right way.

[17:56] I think there's too much unbelief in our hearts as Christians, that we've always got God in the dock. We're always shaking His throat.

Come on, you know, you've got to be more like me. You've got to come down to my level more. And we don't have the reverential fear of this God who is the King of Kings, who has the authority and

the power and the ability to throw to hell or to take to heaven.

And we sometimes lack the urgency of putting Him first in our lives and worshipping Him with awe and with reverence. Sometimes it could be hands in the pockets, worship.

I don't mean that here. I just mean in our lives, a kind of slovenly complacent Christian life where we're more concerned what other people think about us. And I do believe that is at the very core of what Jesus is teaching here.

The more we recognise who God is, the more our life will be transformed and we'll not be afraid of what people think of us, but we'll reverentially fear and worship Him. Very briefly, can I speak also about greed.

[19 : 04] We've looked at fear and we also have greed in a second short bit about the parable of the rich fool. And here I think Jesus is exposing the kind of difference in the crowd, isn't he?

Because there's the disciples that He chooses to speak to and then as He's speaking to them, this guy in the crowd shouts out, someone in the crowd sees them, teacher, tell my brother to divide inheritance with me.

That's amazing, isn't it? It's amazing, Jesus is finished speaking about how important it is to reverence God and to understand eternity and to not fear what people are doing and to get our priorities right.

And there's this stupid guy who's not listening to any of it and he's just festering about what his brother's done with the inheritance. And he says, I just want Jesus to...

because the local rabbis would make decisions about these legal issues. So he obviously says, I'm going along with Jesus and Jesus will make a decision about this. And he was festering and worried about what was going to happen.

[20 : 06] And not listening to anything Jesus would say, so much so that he ended up just blurting out, teacher! Not, will you kind of bring to us a decision about the inheritance because you know, there's me and my brother and I'm older than him and maybe I should get more and what do you think, Jesus?

Oh, it's not like that at all. He says, teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. He's taking all. He had no concept of what Jesus was really about.

And the reply doesn't come across so strongly to us, but in the original it would be kind of... it's his man, he says, it's a kind of frustrated term that Jesus...

he doesn't regard him as a friend at that level, he's kind of annoyed with him because he's missing the point. Jesus isn't here to make decisions on these small matters of inheritance.

And you know, it's not interesting. Probably about 90% of family feuds in this world are about inheritance and about what is going to be left to us, or what hasn't been left to us, or what should be left to us.

[21 : 14] It's not amazing. People don't speak for years in their families over inheritances. And Jesus says, look, I want you to change your priorities in what is important.

I'm not going to rubber stamp what you want here, or what you think I should do. You're ignoring the message. Get off your high horse, he says. And Jesus goes on to warn the crowd about the dangers of greed.

He says, be in your garden, verse 15, against all kinds of greed. A man's life doesn't consist in the abundance of his possessions. How relevant is that message for today? How relevant is it for a world that is teetering on the brink of collapse because of the credit crunch that seems to be getting worse and worse all the time?

And it's a reminder that life is more than what we possess materially. It's more than being in control. It's more than having a great life of prosperity and of health.

What a great lesson. And we have this great parable that he closes this passage by giving. And we can learn from this man and what Jesus is saying about him.

[22 : 25] There's no acknowledgement of God whatsoever in this man's life, apparently. Certainly not that is recorded. The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop and he thought, what shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.

There's no word that this guy gives any thanks to God whatsoever for we presume his health, for we presume his family, for his crops, for his wealth, for the abundance of the harvest, anything.

He just says, oh, I've got this great harvest. What am I going to do with it? How can I benefit from it? A reminder of the importance of giving thanks to God. This morning as we've got up for our health

and strength to enable us to be here for all the many things that we do take and can take for granted on a day to day basis.

But also we can see this guy saw the future purely in worldly terms. He just saw his life as being the many years that lay ahead of him.

That was all that mattered. He had no eternal perspective whatsoever. There was nothing at all in his thinking that made him say, well, I live for, then, you know, I've got to remember that there's eternity after I die.

[23 : 35] And what will I do? No eternal perspective of what lay ahead. And I asked the question, under God's authority, do we have any perspective of eternity?

Are we living purely with a mindset that goes as far as we can go physically in this world? You know, how many years? 70, 80, and the older we get, 80, 90.

You know, we want to live longer in this life. Is that all we've got? Just this life, living for this life. And also his assumption, his presumption, or his imagination was that he was going to have a long life.

You know? I'll rip down my barns, build bigger ones, I'll store my grain, I'll sit to myself. Plenty of good things laid up for many years to take. Life easy. Each drink can be many.

He just presumed, not only that this life was all there was, but that he was going to have a long life.

He was looking forward to luxurious early retirement, 35, 40. Wouldn't it be great?

[24 : 39] That's why he had plenty of money and he could just have a long life. Is that a presumption that you have and that I have, that God owes us a long life and that that is all there is?

And of course the other presumption, or the other characteristic of him is that he equated happiness with absolute self-indulgence. We don't know if he had a family or if he was concerned for them, but certainly all he seems to want to do is to take life easy, eat, drink and be merry. He just wants the rewards of his hard-earned wealth, a life of hedonism and a pleasure.

That happiness equals lots of food, not just any old food, lots of drink, the best of drink, and pleasure to go with it.

And is that our definition of contentment and happiness? Full belly, contentment and happiness and pleasure and the happiness that comes from the glow of a warm whiskey.

Is that what it's about? Is that what life is? Absolute self-indulgence. Well Christ states, just as before he says, deal with fear, he also says, deal with greed. God said to him, you fool, this very night your life will be demanded from you, then who will get what you prepared for yourself?

[26 : 06] This is how it will be for anyone who stores up things for himself, but he's not rich towards God. You fool, it kind of parallels with what he starts with. Man, you know, there's this kind of frustration with Jesus about this guy and you can't see what Jesus has been saying and can't see beyond the blindness and the materialism of this life.

Christ determines our last breath, not ourselves. You know, this night your very soul will be demanded from you. And he wants us to deal with the very core sin that we are engaged in. We might be looking at the rest of the world great compared with everyone else. We're afraid of the Pharisees, we're afraid of maybe what other people think of us.

So we're delighted because we're great in comparison with all the people around us. We're great compared with the people in the church, we're great compared with everyone else. But he says, you know, what about your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ?

And the essence of Christianity is dealing with that selfishness which says, I just want to be rich towards myself and indulge my sinful desires and I want to leave God out of it.

Whereas God says, please accept Jesus Christ into your heart. Give him the first place. Be rich towards God. In other words, open your heart and say, come in. You take first place in my life.

[27 : 34] I accept your gift because I'm a sinner who is lost. And it's the kind of same thinking from Matthew 6.33. Seek first my kingdom and all these things will be added to you.

So you're saying, look, put me first by accepting salvation. And not only will you have all that you need in life, but you will have much more. You will have the unsearchable riches of Christ.

All the other things will fall into place. You will have an inheritance that never spoils or fades so that even if you die, yet shall you live and you will be with Christ forever.

Is it true? Is it time for you to think about these things? Is it time to move from a place of intellectual ascent and move to a place of emotional and conscious decision of following Christ by following His needs and submission and in belief?

Because faith involves that massively. And Christ knows that. And I would encourage you today, if you're considering that, to not just walk out, but to speak to me or to speak to any of the elders.

[28 : 43] And to think about your soul and to think about the challenges of God's word and Jesus Christ. He talks about these twin things that probably are the two pillars that sustain or in the case of the world economy this week don't really sustain the investment industry, fear and greed.

And they are two emotions that will keep us from the Lord Jesus Christ as well. So may we be challenged both as believers and unbelievers to think about the message of Jesus for ourselves. Let's bow our head briefly and pray. Lord God, we ask and pray for your help and for your blessing on us. We pray that you would challenge us from your word, that we would not sit under it, or that we would not sit over it in judgment, that we would sit under it in humble submission. All of us, that we would recognise that your word is a revelation to us from God, that it shows us God in the flesh, in the person of Jesus, that it teaches us the way of salvation.

It exposes our own needs and yet comforts us with your amazing compassion and love and care. Thank you for your intimate interest in our lives. We ask that we would not have our lives driven by fear, particularly fear of what other people think and by greed, which is very often what we think in our hearts, what we want, what our desires are.

And may we not have that attitude which we'd really love to get away with sin as long as nobody found out about it and help us rather to see a change in our desires so that we want to do what our sovereign Lord reveals is how we should live and may we find it in freedom and joy and fullness and life.

[30 : 40] Lord help us, forgive us, teach us, mould us, change us, we ask, in Jesus' name. Amen.