

Facing Opposition

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[0 : 00] Our scripture reading tonight is from Luke's Gospel, chapter 12, verses 4-12.

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do, 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. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies, and not one of them is forgotten before God? Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered.

Fear not, you are of more value than many sparrows. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges Me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God. But the one who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God. 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.

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. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. This is God's holy Word.

It's not too often that I stand up on a Sunday evening, look out, and see the clock saying that it's only five o'clock. So that gives us plenty of time. We're working our way through this section of Luke's Gospel. And in this section, I suppose what we're dealing with are obstacles to discipleship.

[1 : 46] Last week, we looked at a kind of internal obstacle, indwelling sin, the sin of hypocrisy. And in the next few weeks, we're kind of looking at external obstacles, as it were. Opposition, the theme this evening. A number of years ago, I was reflecting on this, and I realized that it was really quite a long time ago. In fact, I was still in my 20s. So that is a very long time ago.

And we were a holiday on the Isle of Aran. And I went on a walk, a ridge walk, with my brother, one of my brothers, Martin. And at that time, he was a soldier. He'd just returned from serving in the Gulf War. And Martin was, still is, really, one of those kind of climb every mountain, and ford every stream kind of guys. And our walk started off quite easily, gentle pace. We climbed higher. The rough track we were following got more and more difficult. We chatted, we talked, laughed, and so forth. Took in the marvelous vista that this route afforded. And that was until the path we were following just disappeared. We consulted the map. For those of you a certain age, a map is a paper thing that you kind of open out. And sure enough, the path just disappeared, petered out.

My brother thought we should just press on regardless and navigate around the lower part of what is known as the Achir Ridge. And so we continued on until we found ourselves, or rather, I found myself clinging, really, to the face of a steep cliff, a few hundred meters drop below. And at this point, the kind of laughter and the joking kind of evaporated. I was kind of clinging on for dear life, hoping not to plummet to my death below. There was, I suppose, a sense of fear. My brother, you know, said things like, oh, we should probably have brought ropes for a climb like this, and I don't think we have the right equipment for a climb of this difficulty. This is actually quite dangerous, David. I said, thanks, thanks, brother. Now, the point of telling the story is that one moment, everything is kind of happy, and we're laughing and joking, taking in the views. The next moment, a whole set of different priorities had come to the fore. Within just really a few minutes, really, everything had changed. The entire mood, the feeling of our walk suddenly dramatically shifted as the terrain changed and danger loomed. And there's something of that kind of shift taking part here in this section of Luke's gospel. Luke is letting us see how, with Jesus journeying towards Jerusalem, the terrain is getting harder. Tension is building. Resistance, as we saw last week, is growing.

Anyone who wants to follow Jesus is going to have to be really committed. If it were a film, we would perhaps suddenly have a... the music would have grown more somber, sinister, darker. Because there's real opposition making its presence felt. It's no longer a kind of gentle stroll in the

country.

This is an arduous climb on a dangerous peak. And one of the big questions for Jesus' followers, as opposition set in, was how would they react? How would they respond? Would they become fearful, anxious? Would they freeze? Would they be unable to move? Would they hide away and simply desert Jesus?

[5 : 57] What would they do? And sometimes we can face such seasons in our own lives, times of hardship and difficulty. The wind appears to be strong in our face, as it was earlier today. The terrain rocky, everything a challenge. How do we respond when things are difficult and challenging?

In Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, a great book from the middle of the 17th century, kind of allegory of the Christian life. There's a point in the story where Christian is joined by someone called Mr. Byenz, and he wants to join Christian on his journey. And he tells Christian, we somewhat differ in religion from those of the stricter sort in two small points. First, we never strive against wind and tide. Secondly, we're always most zealous when religion goes in his silver slippers. We love much to walk with him in the street if the sun shines and the people applaud him.

And Christian responds, if you will go with us, you must go against wind and tide. You must also own religion in his rags, as well as when in his silver slippers, and stand by him too when bound in irons, as well as when he walketh the streets with applause. Christian discipleship is not all about silver slippers, sunny days, comfort, and ease. Hard and difficult times are par for the course.

For those of my generation, we've witnessed a very noticeable, dramatic cultural mood change over many years. The Christian assumptions on which our society, much of our society has been built, now in danger of being swept away. We find the chill winds of strident atheism, militant Islam, blowing in our faces. We see a tide of social and political individualism sweeping away, long-held perspectives on the value of human life. And we've become a culture that now seems to have little room for a robust Christianity. We live in a society where to own up to being a Christian will almost certainly mean opposition and ridicule. In days past, being a Christian may have felt like taking a walk in the outdoors with the sun shining. But now it resembles a much more arduous task, one that demands concentration and application and courage and commitment.

And that change in mood presents us with all kinds of questions as we seek to follow Jesus. And in these verses before us tonight, Jesus deals with this subject. He speaks about facing opposition and how we should go about it. And I want you to notice with me, well, since it's only five past five, five things from the text tonight. Five things that Jesus says we need to do if we're going to press on in our Christian lives. The first is this. We need to have an eternal perspective. Verses four and five.

[9 : 42] I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. 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. We need to have an eternal perspective. One of the first reactions when we face opposition or when things get difficult is that we become afraid. And it's this danger that Jesus, I think, turns to first. In a situation where we're in a minority, we're oppressed, or we're facing trials or difficulties because of our faith. It's easy, perhaps natural, to feel afraid. What will happen? What will they say about us? What will they do to us? It's not an academic point. It's a practical reality for thousands of Christians right across the world today. And that fear can very quickly make us silent. It can seal our lips. It can encourage us to keep our heads down, makes us follow the crowd.

We become so concerned about what others think, what others might say or do to us, that our faith can become paralyzed, rendered ineffectual. I wonder, have you ever wondered what keeps Christians going despite sometimes tremendous hardships and troubles? Think about those who've been martyred for their faith, how they stood firm in the face of fierce opposition, trial, even death. How on earth did they overcome those fears? Where did they find the courage? Think of Ann Askew, a Protestant martyr, 1546, was tortured on the rack so that she could not walk or stand. When asked to recant, she replied this, I came not hither to deny my Lord and Master. She feared God rather than man. She did not fear those who killed the body. She feared and loved the one who has authority to cast men and women into hell.

In other words, such men and women saw the present in the light of the future that is yet to come.

[12 : 09] They saw today in the light of that great tomorrow. They had a perspective that included God and the inevitability of judgment to come. They were more concerned to please God than anyone else.

That was the perspective we were hearing about some months ago of Daniel in Babylon, the perspective of the early Christians. It's what the Reformers had in their days, what many Christians in different parts of the world have also to deal with today. But is that perspective what we have? They're living with an eternal perspective.

But without this perspective, faith will simply wither and wilt. It will shrivel and die.

If we simply have a this-worldly perspective, then we will do all that we can to avoid any kind of difficulty and hardship. We will have the stomach for nothing. And so Jesus says, don't fear those who can only kill the body, because that's the limit of their power. Yes, the tyrant may rage, and the persecutor may threaten, and the mob may bay for blood.

But their power and authority ends at the cemetery gate. They can do their worst, but what is that compared with the God of heaven? And what lies within His power and authority?

[13:46] He is the one who has the power to give us exactly what we deserve and cast us into hell. Here is the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom, a wisdom that factors in the reality of divine accountability and acts accordingly, a wisdom that looks to Jesus as a much-needed Savior and Redeemer and Redeemer and sees in Him the love of God for hell-deserving sinners.

So many of us have lost that biblical perspective that views the life to come in God's new heaven and earth as being more important than this one. We view this world as being big and the world to come as something small and insignificant. According to the Bible, the very reverse is true. It is this world that is small. It is this world that is ephemeral. It is this world that is passing away. It is the new world to come that is great. It is a new world to come that is substantial. It is the new world to come that is eternal and lasting. And we need to have an eternal perspective. It's part of why we're here on a Sunday, isn't it? To be reminded of these things, because we're not going to be reminded of them outside in our culture, are we? We need to have an eternal perspective if we're going to stand in the day of trial. Second thing, we need to remember God's love and care. When opposition sets in, when things get difficult, it's easy for us to doubt that God cares. Why has God allowed this to happen? Doesn't

God care that this is happening to me or to my family? Hardships and difficulties often lead people to doubt God's love. And it's no surprise then that Jesus turns to this matter next. Are not, verse 6, five sparrows sold for two pennies? Not one of them is forgotten before God. Why?

Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, you're of more value than many sparrows. In Jesus' day, the sparrow were a cheap, common bird. In fact, they were among the cheapest things in an ancient market. Small, insignificant, practically worthless. And Jesus says God knows them, and God cares for them. And if God lavishes such care on these small creatures, how much more is He concerned for His children? He even knows the hairs on your head. He knows that people are more valuable than sparrows. And this illustration that Jesus uses is designed to convey the fact that God cares for His people in every aspect of their lives. He loves and looks after those who belong to Him. It doesn't mean that bad things may not happen to us. But it does mean that we are never outwith the scope of His care and love, no matter how difficult and hard things may appear.

Oh, Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know me when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from afar, says the psalmist. You search out my path, my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue. Behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. I wonder if we've ever even begun to grasp the incomparable greatness of God's love.

[17:56] For the amazing, for the amazing, almost unbelievable reality is that for this great God, your life matters to Him. Those apparently insignificant details that we brood about, that we're anxious over, those things that make us afraid, those concerns that we hold on to and won't let go, those things that internally tie us up in knots, all because we are too proud to bring them to Him. If we really know that God cares for us, we will not be slow to cast even those things upon Him.

Remember Peter writing to Christians facing hard and difficult times, 1 Peter 5, 6, and 7, Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time He may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on Him. Why? Because He cares for you. And if we're going to keep going in hard times, then we need to know that. You need to know that God loves and cares for you. You're worth so much to Him. Look what He's done for you. He sent Jesus to live the life that you could never live and to die in your place on the cross of Calvary. He shed His blood for you. That's how much He cares.

An old hymn we used to sing back in the day, a children's hymn, God who sent His Son to die on Calvary. He, if I lean on Him, will care for me. Are you leaning on Him tonight? We need to have an eternal perspective. We need to remember God's care and love. Thirdly, we need to publicly confess Jesus. One of the other dangers we face when opposition sets in is that temptation to be quiet about our faith, to be quiet about our allegiance to Jesus. Let's keep the heads down. Let's not draw any attention to ourselves. But look what Jesus says here in verse 8 and 9, I tell you, everyone who acknowledges Me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. But the one who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God. Publicly acknowledging or confessing Jesus is not a small matter. It is a test of our allegiance and loyalty. It's a test of what is going on in our hearts. And being identified with Jesus is part and parcel of what it means to be His follower, a disciple. And we must, says Jesus, acknowledge Him before others, before a watching world. Do we love Him? Do we value Him? Or are we ashamed of Him? Is He our joy and delight?

Are we living for Him? Confessing Jesus publicly and openly is an essential part of being a Christian. Remember what Paul says to the church in Rome, if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

[21 : 37] There's no such thing as secret Christianity. Yes, of course, that can be difficult at home. Perhaps it can meet with scorn at school, university. It can meet with ridicule.

At work it can meet with derision. But if we keep silent, it's because we are more concerned about what others think about us than we are about what God thinks. Following Jesus will mean reproach and rejection at times, for no servant is greater than his master. Why would you be ashamed of Jesus Christ?

Now, of course, the acknowledgement that Jesus is referring to here is not a one-off. It's not something occasional, lapse. He's referring to something that is persistent and ongoing, a refusal to acknowledge Him. Because that public identification with and confession of Jesus is really a sign that we love Him and that we desire to follow Him. It's a sign that we are putting Him first, that He is our Lord and Savior. And so, in acknowledging Him before others, Jesus says we will be acknowledged before the angels in heaven. We will stand accepted for all eternity. But if we are constantly denying Him, then we will find ourselves denied. A persistent failure to acknowledge Jesus, you see, is a sign that we don't really love Him. We love only ourselves and our reputation and our status.

Now, of course, of course, there's that famous example. You'll remember Peter, who denied Jesus three times, refused even to acknowledge that he knew Him. The most famous, prominent disciple of Jesus was guilty of denying Him. And yes, it is easy for us to do the same, to shrink back, to blend chameleon-like into the background. But of course, we learn that Peter received forgiveness, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, was commissioned as a preacher of the gospel and as a witness to the risen Christ. And he became someone whose love for Jesus eventually meant martyrdom. He chose to die a cross rather than deny Jesus again. It's a test, you see, of how much you love the Lord Jesus Christ.

How much do you love Him? Do you love Him enough to stand out and to speak up? We need to have an eternal perspective. We need to remember God's love and care. We need to publicly confess Jesus. Fourthly, we need to hold on to the gospel. Unfortunately, in time of trial, men and women can abandon the gospel and lose faith altogether. There have been instances, I think, under severe persecution, Christianity has been eradicated from certain geographical areas of the world. Not just that Christians were killed and martyred, it was because some abandoned the faith altogether. Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, verse 10, will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. What's Jesus speaking about here?

[25 : 24] Well, clearly what He's speaking about is related to forgiveness. The Christian gospel is a gospel of forgiveness. It's a gospel of pardon. A restored relationship with God can only begin with the forgiveness of forgiveness of forgiveness. Later on in the gospel, Jesus describes the purpose of His death in these words, this is My blood poured out for what? The forgiveness of sins. Being forgiven underpins everything in the Christian life. How on earth can we ourselves be a people of forgiveness unless we ourselves have known the forgiving love of God? Notice how Jesus speaks here about two kinds of sin, a sin that can be forgiven, and then He speaks about a sin that cannot be forgiven. And the sin that can be forgiven is described as one that speaks against the Son of

Man, that is Jesus. This refers to those who have seen Jesus at work, but through misunderstanding, a lack of sin that can be forgiven, and He speaks against Him, only later to repent and believe and enjoy the forgiveness that He alone can bring. An example of that might be Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee, blasphemed against Jesus, spoke out against Him and His followers, and yet later came to forgiveness and faith. Perhaps some of us here, before we became Christians, spoke out against the Lord Jesus Christ, against the Lord Jesus Christ, against the church, against the gospel, and yet subsequently came to know the truth and know God's forgiveness for ourselves. And this is the gospel we have to hold on to. It's a gospel of life. It's not without reason that the Apostles' Creed says, I believe in the forgiveness of sin. And yet there's another sin that Jesus mentions here in solemn words. He describes something that we know as the unpardonable sin, a sin for which there is apparently no forgiveness.

And that's a scary thought. Sometimes, as a minister, you come across people who tell you that they're afraid that they've committed the unpardonable sin. In my opinion, the very fact that they're afraid that they've committed such a sin is a testimony enough that they haven't. Because if someone is worried about having committed the unpardonable sin, then clearly they haven't committed the unpardonable sin. Those guilty of what Jesus here calls blasphemy against the Holy Spirit are not in the slightest bit afraid of what they've done.

The reference here is to a heart hardened against the gospel and determined on a course of apostasy, an utter rejection of the Spirit's work. And such people are in no way inclined to seek the forgiveness of God. The letter to the Hebrews, written to Christians facing great opposition, tempted to abandon the faith. And the author writes there in Hebrews chapter 6, verse 4, it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who've tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the power of the age to come. If they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding Him up to contempt. Well, we're not going to go down the whole of that passage tonight, but there's a people who have tasted something of the power of the age to come, have come under the influence in some way of the Holy Spirit, but have ended up repudiating the gospel entirely.

And that is a danger. People come and they get influenced, shaped by the church culture perhaps, to a degree, but it's never really owned. It's never really personal.

[29 : 44] I remember having a most sobering conversation with a man I consider a fine minister and preacher of the gospel, and yet who abandoned it all and turned his back on Jesus Christ to pursue a very different lifestyle. And the path he chose involved both a rejection of the Bible's authority and a repudiation of the Spirit's work. And so, friends, in these days, as never before perhaps, we need to encourage one another to hold on to the gospel, the gospel of life, the gospel of forgiveness. Again, that's part of the importance of the fellowship of God's people.

We need an eternal perspective. We need to remember God's love and care for us. We need to publicly confess Jesus, no matter what. We need to hold on to the gospel.

And fifthly and finally, we need to rely on the Holy Spirit. And when, verse 11, they bring you before the synagogues and rulers and authorities, don't be anxious about how you should defend yourself, what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you want to say. There are situations in life, aren't there, when it's natural for us to be worried about what we're going to say. Perhaps we have to make a speech or we have to present a paper. Maybe we have to give testimony in a court of law.

In these verses, Jesus speaks about that kind of situation. He knows that following and being faithful to Him will be costly. His disciples may find themselves in trouble with the authorities. And in such circumstances, Jesus knows that His followers may have to defend themselves. A daunting prospect. Only natural that His disciples be anxious about such a possibility.

[31 : 51] And so, Jesus gives a great promise here to His followers. He doesn't promise a get-out-of-jail-free card. He promises them the help of the Holy Spirit. It tells them not to worry. The Holy Spirit will teach them what to say when required. It's a very specific promise. It's not given to preachers who don't prepare their sermons. It is given to men and women facing the pressure of this world's antagonism and hatred. It's a word of comfort that the Comforter, the Spirit, will be with us in such times. And that in all our weakness and frailty that we so often feel, we can rely on Him. We can trust Him.

Martin Lloyd-Jones tells a story in one of his books of a young girl in the days of the Covenanters. She's traveling to a prohibited afternoon communion service. And the king's soldiers were on the look out for anyone going to such a meeting. Unfortunately for the poor girl, she stumbled into a band of soldiers and found herself trapped. And she answered her inquisitors by telling them this, My elder brother has died. They're going to read his will this afternoon. He's done something for me, and he's left something for me, and I want to hear them read the will.

And they allowed her to pass. The Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you must say. The Holy Spirit was the lifelong companion of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the Spirit who was in and upon our Lord Jesus is now, if we're Christian believers tonight, is now in and upon our lives, bringing to us all that Christ was and is for us. He is our comforter. He is our helper. He is our counselor. He is our teacher. And so, the truth is, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are never, ever alone, because He is always with us. He's promised never to leave us, never to forsake us, never to abandon us. God has not left you defenseless in this world. Jesus Christ has gone before us. He has won a great victory for us. He is our great champion. He is our shield, our high tower, our refuge and strength. And friends, we need to hear that again and again and again as we travel the path of Christian discipleship. Christ does not leave us alone on the journey of faith. He is with us. He will help us. He will stand with us. He will calm our fears. He will give us the words to say. He has promised this, and He will surely do it. And that's what will keep us going when things get tough, when problems arise. We remember that Jesus Christ is on the throne. We remember what He's done for us. We remember what He's promised us. We remember that He will be with us always.

[35 : 24] Again, the writer to the Hebrews, let us hold fast our confession, for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. What's he saying there? Jesus understands.

Jesus has overcome. And so, if you belong to Jesus Christ, nothing can ultimately destroy you. The power of sin has been broken. Death itself has been defeated. The evil powers of this world have been conquered. Jesus Christ is Lord, and therefore in Him nothing can separate you from the love of God.

God. And so, when the mood music in your life begins to change, perhaps to more somber tones, when the mood music of our culture feels darker and more ominous, what is the Christian disciple to do?

What does Jesus tell us here? He says, live your life with an eternal perspective. He says, live your life conscious of God's care and love. Live your life publicly confessing Jesus as Lord. Don't be afraid to do that. Live your life holding on to the gospel of divine forgiveness. And live your life conscious that Christ is with you always in the power of the Holy Spirit. And that He will never leave you, never forsake you, and never abandon you. He will hold you fast. Do not be afraid. Let's pray together.

Father, you know our situations, our circumstances, you know our fears and our worries. You know the opposition that we face, the troubles that come our way. Lord, help us in the midst of all of these to persevere in the way of faith. Help us to have an eternal perspective on these matters. Help us to live today in the light of that great tomorrow. Help us to know your care and love in our lives. Help us to speak up when we get the opportunity. Help us to know your life. Help us to know your life. Help us to know your life. Help us to lean upon the Lord Jesus and to draw from the Holy Spirit all that we need to remain faithful and true disciples of Christ. And we pray this in His name. Amen.