Trusting God or Pleasing People?
Luke 12:1-12

Last week Mark took us through the last part of Luke 11, where Jesus has some strong stuff to say against the Pharisees and religious lawyers. And chapter 11 ends with this increasing hostility on the part of the religious leaders toward Jesus. Luke tells us they were pressing Jesus hard. They were trying to provoke him, laying in wait for him, trying to catch him out in something he might say. So there was this growing opposition on their part to Jesus.

But these were strange days, because alongside the growing hostility, there were, as Luke tells us, in v1 of chapter 12, thousands of ordinary people who were coming out to hear Jesus. In fact, so keen were they to get a slice of the action, they were trampling on one another to get near him.

And it's in that environment of growing opposition on the one hand, and pop-star like popularity on the other, that Jesus turns to his disciples and warns them. And he warns them because when he leaves them, and they become the first leaders of the church, they are going to face the same dangers of opposition and popularity. And Jesus' warning, which is just as pertinent for us now as it was then, is: if you are going to live to please people, rather than God, you're going to get seriously unstuck.

Hypocrisy: the Danger of Religious Popularity

So with all these thousands of people coming to hear him, Jesus says to the disciples: v1: "Beware, of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." Beware, be on your guard, watch out for this, He says. Of all the things you are going to face in your own heart and in the hearts of others, you're going to meet this. And just like a little leaven can spread though the dough and cause the whole dough to rise, so hypocrisy, can come on insidiously and spread through the community of the church, affecting every part. It can be like a cancer eating away at honesty and openness and integrity.

And here's why. As Bishop Ryle said, 'The hypocrisy of the Pharisees is deeply engrained in human nature'. It's as if we all have a little Pharisee living inside each one of us. And that might show itself in our amazing ability to point the finger at others, while all the time we do the same things. Or in our desire to look good to others, to put on a religious mask, to put on an appearance of godliness, while underneath something very different is going on. It's a kind of religion, a kind of righteousness, that's only skin deep.

And it's no coincidence that Jesus warns his disciples of this as thousands are coming to them, because hypocrisy is the huge danger of popularity. It's a temptation of leadership, and it's a temptation in churches, where we can hold people at arms length, and put on a respectable, religious mask, because, after all, we want people to like us and accept us, and there's this Christian subculture where everything has to be ok, but underneath and inside, something different is going on.

And leaders can do that, and followers can do that. And there are different varieties of it. If the church is of a size where there can be a degree of anonymity, we can have this veneer that everything is ok, and we've got it all together,

whereas underneath we're struggling. Or we can sing the songs and play the part, but underneath the heart is cold. Or the leader can act it out, up front on the stage, but back home and in private, when the mask slips, things are very different.

That is the danger of hypocrisy, of putting on a mask so others think well of you. And the tragedy is, you end up living a double life. You become like a chameleon, changing your colour to the environment. At church, with others, everything ok, externally righteous, but in private, on the inside there is this secret inner life. And Jesus has come, not to put a lick of paint on the outer life, not to make us look impressive to others, but to put the inner life right. To convert and change our hearts, to give us new hearts. Religion seeks to change the outside. Jesus changes the inside, and only then can the outer life come right as an overflow of the inside.

And how much better to allow him to do that now, than leave it for the day when everything will be exposed? As he makes clear to the disciples in v2, 'Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.' There will be a day when the hidden, inner life will be exposed, when the secrets of men's hearts will be revealed. So why not allow Him to do His transforming work now?

And to help you move in that direction, I want to give you one general principal and two practical suggestions. The first general principal is that you cannot do this on your own, or in your own strength. If it is our hearts that are the problem, we need a power from outside to change them, and Jesus and his grace and his Spirit at work within us are that power. Listen to what Paul says to the Thessalonians (2 Thess 1:11-12): 'To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith *by his power*, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.' How can we become worthy of his calling? How can we fulfill every resolve for good? How can we perform the works that come from faith? How can Jesus be glorified in us? In short, how can our inner life and our outer life be what they should be? And Paul's answer is, by his powerful grace. So how can we see this happening in our own lives? By looking with faith to Jesus to do it for us.

And two practical suggestions to help you combat hypocrisy in your own heart. Break out of the anonymity of church, where you can get by with a veneer, and get into a home group or a bible study and share honest life together. And secondly, if this is something you are struggling with, as we all do, get into an accountable relationship, find a friend, with whom you are safe and able to bring the stuff on the inside out into the light of day, because that goes a long way to breaking the hold that darkness and secrecy can have on you, and so you can pray for one another, and receive more of his powerful grace.

Well, if the danger of popularity is hypocrisy, the danger of facing opposition is, who are you going to fear?

Fear and Fear Not

And Jesus says to the disciples, when you face opposition, and you will, when you face threats to your safety, and they did, don't fear man: v4, 'I tell you my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.' For them, it was 'don't fear the Pharisees or the Roman state who threaten you'; for us, it is 'don't fear the atheistic, secularizing forces in society who mock you'. And without wanting to sound overly dramatic, if the current trajectory in the UK and Europe and to a degree in the US continues as it is, this business of who we fear is something we have got to get settled in our own minds once and for all. I don't think it is any exaggeration to say that we are probably not many years away from Christians being imprisoned in the UK for simply saying what the bible says. Just a couple of weeks ago a Christian restaurant owner received a visit from the Police who warned him against displaying Bible verses in his restaurant. All he had was a screen on the back wall with a silent loop of bible verses and pretty backgrounds and the police paid him a visit, to warn him against hate speech. And that in the land that gave the world the King James Bible. As Isaiah says in Is 59:14, "justice is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter." So we do well to resolve this issue of fear ahead of time.

But have you asked yourself, what is it that lies behind this fear of man? What is it that makes us happy to say we're Christians here, amongst friends, but keep our heads down, if the conversation takes a turn at work, or on campus? Well, at its root, doesn't this fear thrive on concern for ourselves? 'What will they think of me? Or say about me? Or do to me? How will they treat me if I say what I think I should say?' So at the root of this fear of man is this concern for our own well being.

And Jesus' response to that is not, don't worry, they won't really do anything to hurt you, or speak against you, you're just worrying needlessly. His response is: don't fear those whose powers are so limited. Your fear is directed in the wrong place, it's terminating on the wrong person. V5: 'I will warn you whom to fear,' he says, 'fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!'

And with this three-fold repetition in that verse of who we are to fear, Jesus just drives the message home: 'don't fear man, fear God, fear God fear God.'

So how can we escape the fear of man? By fearing God: because he's the one with the real authority, he's the one with the real say over your life. Sure man can verbally or physically hurt, your so called friends can do that, your colleagues can do that, the authorities can do that. But it's God who has the ultimate power.

Now when Jesus says it's God who has the authority to cast into hell, the term He uses for Hell is Gehenna. And that word comes from the name of the valley of Hinnom, which lay just outside Jerusalem. It was the place where, in the dark days of Israel, children where sacrificed to the pagan god Molech. And so when Israel turned back to God, it became known as this accursed place where the

bodies of murderers and the unclean were thrown and rubbish was tipped and there was this continual fire burning there. And that's the imagery Jesus draws on to describe hell.

And Jesus' point is, look if you are wondering who to fear, then fear him with the real power. Because as one commentator puts it, temporary discomfort here and now, is far preferable to a worse calamity in the age to come (Yarbrough).

But it's not just about fear, it's also about faith and who you're trusting. Because if the fear of man has at its root concern for our own wellbeing, then Jesus says 'I'll tell you who is really caring for you, who's really looking out for you.' v6-7: '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.'

Now, you don't need me to tell you how many sparrows there are, how common they are. And apparently they were the cheapest thing sold in the market. In fact you can still by sparrows in Migros. Just go to the frozen food section, and you'll find them labeled chickens – poulet. At least a Swiss chicken's about the same size as a sparrow. And in Jesus day, you could get five sparrows for two pennies. Which is interesting, because in his gospel, Matthew says you get two, for one penny. So if you get two for a penny in Matthew's Gospel and five for two pennies in Luke's gospel, does that mean that either Jesus or Luke got his maths wrong? Shouldn't five sparrows have cost you two and a half pennies, not just two? And the answer's no – sparrows were so cheap, that if you bought 4 they would throw a 5th one in for free.

And Jesus is saying, 'not even one of these sparrows is forgotten by God'. And He who looks after the smallest, cheapest, most dispensable of birds that you buy and sell for a few pennies and give away for free, and yet He knows them all, don't you think he's looking out for you too? Don't you think he cares for you? You are concerned for your wellbeing, and that is what drives this fear of what others might do to you, but he's the one who really knows you and cares for you. And this world may have plans for your life, but His are infinitely better.

And then Jesus says, 'even the hairs of your head are all numbered.' Now I suspect you're imagining a thick thatch of hair. I don't think so. He's talking to a bunch of men, and they're real men, with lots of testosterone, so no doubt they're going a bit thin. And he's already talked about the sparrows and how there are lots of them, and now he tells us our God is a God of the details. Even the hairs of our head are numbered. Which means he spends time searching. He's not going to let one pass him by. And He finds one, and it goes in the book. Well, whether it's a thatch or a polished ping-pong ball. Jesus is saying, not even the smallest detail of your life goes unnoticed.

And if hair, then cancer. If hair, then finances. If hair, then children. If hair, then persecution. Whatever the detail is, he knows it and he cares for you. And the future he has in mind for you is far better than anything anyone else has to offer. And it is God's valuation of you that matters. Others might dismiss you as not

worth it if they discover you're a Christian. Others might estimate your value based on your intellect, or your colour, or your earning power, or your house, your car. But the value God puts on you is that of his Son, whom He sent to die, to rescue you. It's not dependent on your productivity, on you reaching a certain standard. It's His gracious undeserved, unearnt love for you. When you understand that, you can face life without fear. If you fear God you don't need to fear anyone or anything else. You can trust him.

Acknowledging Jesus: Faith and Grace
v8-9: '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 Jesus' warning is pretty stark. If you refuse to be counted among Jesus followers on earth, your decision will be ratified on the last day. Choosing to deny Jesus, choosing not to suffer for Him, says something of what is most valuable in our hearts, and we must care more for Christ's praise than anyone else's. Living for man's praise, to please man, may buy us some years of pleasure, but we will reap an eternity of sorrow. Thankfully, the opposite is also true – in this life, we can acknowledge Jesus, and be clear about our allegiance to him, and the rewards for that are wonderful, whatever the cost down here.

Now, the truth is that we will all deny Him at times, whether by what we say or do, and when we do we're in good company – so did Peter. The point is your heart. Do you repent as you become aware of it, or do you turn further away from him? Peter repented and turned back to Jesus, and as Jesus makes clear in v10, there is forgiveness to be found for the one who turns back: 'Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven.' It's that forgiveness that first Peter and then Paul found to be life changing.

But the gospels tell us of another man who denied Jesus who never turned back. That's Judas. In some ways he regretted his sin and had remorse for his sin, but he never repented. And it is the one who turns further away who gives evidence, like Judas, that he never really was one of His. And that is what Jesus is talking about in v10: 'but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.' The person who persistently resists the Holy Spirit, and his message of grace and forgiveness, will not find forgiveness. As one commentator has said (Wilcock): "The man who is determined to go to hell will certainly get there". And the ultimate blasphemy is to resist God all the way to hell. Such a man could be forgiven, but he refuses to be and that is unforgiveable.

Now, there may be times when you worry that you have committed the unforgiveable sin. But the very fact that you are concerned about it tells you your heart is still tender and not irrevocably hardened to the Spirit. Whatever sin it is, there is forgiveness still to be found in Jesus.

And for these disciples, and for us, Jesus has better and higher hopes, and that is not because we are so skilled at apologetics or arguing the case for Christ. It is because he makes the Holy Spirit available to us, to help us speak when we are

put on the spot: v11-12 ‘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.’

Your ability to stand up and speak up for Jesus, doesn’t in the end depend on you, but on Him. He gives the Holy Spirit to you, as His gracious gift. And as you put your faith in Him and trust Him and His enabling power, Jesus says you will find the Spirit will speak to you and through you. He doesn’t promise to get you out of hot water, He promises you help in your hot water.

So whether your struggle is hypocrisy, and the dangers of wanting to be popular, or whether it’s the fear of man: it’s Jesus who changes your heart so you might live for His praise and not man’s; it’s God your Heavenly Father who cares for you and has your best future in mind; and it’s the Holy Spirit who equips you with everything you need to stand in the fight. It’s all of faith and grace. So, who are you going to fear? Who are you going to draw near to in faith? Let’s fear Him and trust Him to do everything He promises.