

The Hairs of Your Head are All Numbered
Luke 12:4-12, 49-59
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Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Read Luke 12:4-12, 49-59

"(Jesus) said, 'Blessed (rather) are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28)

Introduction

I don't watch stand-up comedy besides the clean guys like Tim Hawkins and Brian Regan, but someone told me about a story that actor and comedian Patton Oswalt told, and it works great here. Don't look it up because there's terrible language. I watched it so you don't have to! Patton was watching TV with his young daughter and when he first turned on the TV the movie *Wolfman* was on. And the main character had just transformed into a wolf, there was blood coming out of his mouth, and Patton was really afraid that his daughter would be scared, so he changed the channel. Later she wanted to watch "School House Rock" and he was hoping that would make her forget about the bloody wolfman. So they watched the song "Dem Not So Dry Bones." When it was over, they went to bed, but at four in the morning, his daughter came into her parent's bedroom screaming and crying. And Patton thought, "Oh no, the Wolfman has traumatized her and it's all my fault. "Honey, what's wrong?" "My bones are going to come out of my body!" And his wife said, "What did you show her on TV?" "It was just School House Rock!" "Honey, it's pretend. Your bones are not going to come out of your body." They finally calmed her down. A few minutes later their daughter started giggling. "Honey, what's so funny?" "That doggy was wearing a shirt!"

Sometimes we're afraid of the wrong thing. Where Wolfman should have scared a young girl, instead a children's cartoon did. But it's not just children who sometimes are afraid of the wrong thing or the wrong person. An important part of life is figuring out who we should fear and who we can trust. And you might think that I'm transitioning into saying that we should trust God and fear Satan, but actually I'm not. We actually need to fear God. Our passage today asks some foundational questions about who we will fear: God or man. You will not be able to endure the trials of this life, any persecution that comes your way, or the lure of fleshly sins that surround you if you do not fear God more than you fear other people.

Our first section, verses 4-12, teach us to simultaneously

I. Fear God's Judgment and Trust God's Goodness (vv. 4-12)

⁴ "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ⁵ 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! ⁶ Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. ⁷ Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows. ⁸ "And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, ⁹ but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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, ¹² for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

Did you know that the Bible uses the verb “fear” hundreds of times when it’s referring to God? We saw it over and over in our study of Ecclesiastes. Is fear just the mere respect or awe of God? Or is it something deeper? How can we fear God when 1 John 4:18 says that His “perfect love casts out fear”? We have to have Proverbs 1:7 as our starting point: “*The fear of the Lord is the **beginning** of knowledge.*” We have to start with the fact that God is the most powerful being in the universe, and there is no close second! It is wise on our part to fear Someone who could wipe out every one of His enemies with a single word. When Jesus said in verse 5, “*fear Him who has authority to cast into hell,*” He wasn’t talking about Satan, He was talking about God! God alone has the authority to punish us eternally. But that’s not where we stop with God, obviously. We don’t fear Him because He’s always angry with us; on the contrary, these verses tell us that He numbers every hair on your head and considers you of greater value than the rest of His creation. We are to fear God in His power but draw near to Him in trust and love because of His great care and loving kindness for us.

“*Do not fear those who kill the body*” in verse 4 was not a mere philosophical bit of wisdom from Jesus to His disciples, it was a bit of prophecy and a warning. Jesus’ disciples would need to remember these words because every one of them except John would be killed, martyred, for their commitment to Him. According to church history, James was stoned, Peter was crucified upside down, Paul was beheaded, Matthew and Thomas were stabbed to death. Jesus was saying that *when* you are arrested or persecuted, fearing and obeying God more than men is the only thing that will get you through that. And the rest of the verses give two other things that will be essential to remember in the time of trial and persecution: the fact that God cares intimately for you, and that the Holy Spirit will give you wisdom when you need it.

In our day, we fear the wrath of people who disagree with us, we fear being called out or cancelled for our views. In other parts of the world, and certainly in the history of the world, people live with a fear of being arrested or killed for having the wrong opinions or religious commitments. For the most part we don’t have to worry about that. And yet, perhaps what Jesus says about having to defend yourself before rulers and authorities may be closer than you think. I don’t know how much you’ve seen that different countries are criminalizing pastors preaching and counseling that the Bible supports marriage as only between a man and a woman, or that God has indelibly created people as male and female. In Canada, it’s called the C-4 bill.¹ I’m not advocating for shock therapy treatment or forcing anyone to convert or being angry at anyone for their sexuality or anything like that. But even areas of this country are starting to make it illegal for a pastor or a counselor to explain Biblical truths in those areas. The government is the last place we should turn for how to interpret our Bibles. And we will have to obey God and not fear men in every area of our lives.

I love that these nine verses go back and forth between challenge and encouragement: fear God because He is powerful; no, don’t fear God because He loves you deeply; but fear Him if you deny His Son or blaspheme His Spirit; but finally, praise God because He’ll give you the strength and words to defend yourself when you need it. It’s both “fear God deeply” and “trust God completely.”

Let’s work through verses 8-9: “*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.*” These verses rely on our understanding that Jesus is our intermediary and our advocate in heaven. We studied Islam in our community group last week and one of the things that they believe is that two angels record all of your good and bad deeds for Allah to decide whether to let you into heaven. There is no such teaching in the Bible, our good and bad deeds are not weighed

¹ <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/ad-fontes/bill-c-4-history-concerns-and-response/>

to see if we deserve salvation. You are either clothed with the righteousness of Christ and saved because of His grace on your behalf, or you are not. And evidence of that relationship with Jesus, part of your response to His grace and love in your life is that you will be His witness, you acknowledge Him before the world. If you had a moment of weakness, when some guy in the locker room made fun of you for being a Christian and you denied it; or you're in a work setting where people are disparaging Christians and you stayed silent – does Jesus just disown you on the spot and you lose your salvation? I don't believe so, that does not seem to be the overwhelming teaching of the Scriptures – we don't lose our salvation once we are justified and adopted into God's family. Even the following verse 10 says that you will be forgiven for speaking a word against Jesus. Without getting too deep into all the explanations of what a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is, the easiest way to describe it is the persistent and repeated denying of God's power and the message of the Gospel, rejecting the Spirit's call on your life. I've heard it said that if you're worried about whether you've committed the unforgivable sin, then you haven't committed it!

We skip ahead to similar teachings starting in verse 49, where we see that

II. Jesus Brings Both Deliverance and Division (vv. 49-53)

49 "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! 50 I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! 51 Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. 52 For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. 53 They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Yeah, not so much here. Of course, a meek and mild Jesus who just talked about love and was very non-threatening would never have been crucified! In verse 49, Jesus sounds like He is ready to just lash out with fire. His disciples had asked if they could call down fire from heaven a couple chapters ago, and He just said, "Chill, guys" (my paraphrase). Now is He saying, "I wish this judgment was happening, let's bring that fire down, I'm ready to roast some sinners"? I think we need to link verses 49 and 50 – fire and baptism. Because the baptism is what? The cross, the great cleansing act. And the fire of judgment is going to come through the cross. Jesus would endure the heat of divine judgment in suffering the wrath of God on our behalf. The shadow of the cross hung over Him in His life, and He felt anguish and distress waiting for it to happen. He was resolute to see it through, but He knew it would be painful.

Then we get to verse 51: *"Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division."* But the Bible keeps telling me that Jesus came to bring peace? He's even called the "Prince of Peace"!

Luke 2:14 – *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace..."*

Romans 5:1 – *"... we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through... Jesus Christ."*

John 14:27a – *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."*

But here He says He didn't come to bring peace, how do we reconcile these things?

The Greek word for "division" in v. 51 (*diemerismos*), is a strong word that indicates "diametric opposition." People won't just have slightly different opinions of Jesus; they will fight on account of Him. Because ultimately Jesus is offensive:

-He claimed to be the only way, not one way among many.

-He claimed that what you believe matters, not that "as long as you're consistent in your beliefs you'll be OK."

-He didn't say you can do whatever you want as long as you don't hurt anyone.

-And He doesn't call someone halfway in, He calls them to intense loyalty and obedience. The true Jesus of the Bible is not acceptable to the "Spirit of the age" in our day or in any day. If you follow Him, you will experience opposition, even hatred. You will not be loved by many, even your own family. Don't be surprised when it happens, here is the warning. You will have division and strife, but at the same time He will give you peace with God and comfort from His Spirit. May our spiritual family provide the joy and community if we are rejected by our earthly family. But again, it will come down to whether you fear God or fear humans.

The final six verses teach us to

III. Seek Understanding and Forgiveness (vv. 54-59)

⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming.' And so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? ⁵⁷ "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? ⁵⁸ As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. ⁵⁹ I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny."

I read a report a few years ago put out by Christian leaders and thinkers about what the church might look like in 2050, in 30 years. It gave the current trends of population demographics, churches growing or declining, specific age categories leaving or staying with the church, etc. It was a huge study and pointed out tons of things that the American evangelical church as a whole needs to do to not lose the next generation or two of people; things like planting 8,000 new churches per year for the next 30 years, raising up Christian scholars, finding the most effective online forums for presenting the faith, reaching youth with true faith and not just fun; things like that. It was very interesting because the report cited this passage, Jesus' teaching that the people of his day could tell the weather, but they couldn't "interpret the times" – they couldn't figure out what God was doing in their day. And so the report was saying that we need to have the spiritual eyes to see how God is moving in our day, and to respond appropriately.

What was Jesus saying to the crowds? When all you can talk about is the weather and all you care about is trivial things, you need to think about the important things! It's so much more important that you realize that the Messiah is among you and is about to achieve eternal salvation for all His people. In one sense, Jesus' glory was veiled, so He looked just like any man. But in another sense, He was casting demons out of people, cleansing lepers, making blind people see, calming storms – crazy stuff that nobody else could do that should have been clear, obvious signs of His divinity. And yet they were blind to it, they could not interpret what God was doing.

The final teaching in the last three verses about paying back your debts can be understood in personal terms, but the real urging is to get your life right with God. If you can come to the understanding that you are guilty and carry a spiritual debt, you need to figure out how to deal with it before you go in front of the eternal Judge. How do you do that? By paying a big fine, by doing some slick maneuvering to get the charges dismissed, by promising to be on your best behavior from here on out? No, none of those work. You have your debt cancelled by Jesus' taking on your debt and paying it Himself! We've had some hard teachings about how to stand for Jesus and live out our Christian lives throughout our text this morning. But little of that matters until we know that our eternal destiny is secure, that we are able to settle our debt with God through faith in His Son, who secured our salvation through His death on the cross.

Conclusion

Do you know the name Meriem Ibrahim? She was in the news several years ago. She grew up with a Muslim father and an Orthodox Christian mother in Sudan. In 2011, she was imprisoned there for apostasy, professing faith in Christ and marrying a Christian. Three years after being imprisoned, despite being 8 months pregnant, she was sentenced to one hundred lashes and death by hanging if she did not disown Jesus to the Muslim authorities.² Thankfully, the US and England called on Sudan to release her, eventually a judge ordered her release from prison, and she and her family have resettled in New Hampshire. All's well that ends well, but what a horrible ordeal she went through; a long prison term and a sentence of torture and death that looked like it would actually happen. I don't think anyone would have blamed Meriem for going along with the authorities and saying, "OK, I renounce Jesus, I'm sorry that I ever believed in Him." She would have saved her own life and the life of her unborn baby, kept her son from growing up without a mother, and her husband from being a widower. But she didn't. Because she feared God more than she feared men. Because she saw that standing up against this persecution would help others who came after her. Ultimately, she decided that acknowledging Jesus before men would be greater than denying Him, and that her reward in heaven would make anything that happens here on earth worth it.

Bishop JC Ryle said this:

"Christ's people shall never be entirely forsaken. Though sorely harassed, they shall not be destroyed. Though cast down they shall not be cast away. At the darkest time let true Christians rest in the thought, that 'greater is He who is for them than all they that be against them.'... There is One living for them in heaven, who can make these winds and waves to cease in a moment. The true church, of which Christ is the Head, shall never perish. Its glorious Head is almighty, and lives for evermore, and His believing members shall all live also, and reach home safe at last."³

Another man who was a martyr in the English Reformation, John Hooper, said more succinctly, "Life is sweet and death is bitter. But eternal life is more sweet and eternal death is more bitter."⁴

So back to the question: do I fear God? If you are a human being who has ever committed a sin and have not found a person with a perfect record to die in your place to pay the penalty of your sins, you should fear God greatly and know that He will judge you unfavorably when you die; your sins deserve a sentence of death and eternal punishment. If you are a human being who has ever committed a sin and you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, who died in your place and paid the penalty for your sins, you have nothing to fear in judgment. Fearing God for you means acknowledging His ultimate greatness, sovereignty, and supremacy. But you know Him as your loving Father, You are His beloved child, He knows every hair on your head, He has adopted you into His eternal family, and you will live forever in heaven with Him. And that will give you the courage to live boldly for Him, not bowing to human beings or earthly authorities. Amen.

Benediction - 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 - "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*"

² Thabiti Anyabwile, *Exalting Jesus in Luke* (Nashville: Holman, 2018), p. 202, and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/01/meriam-ibrahim-arrives-in-us>

³ J.C. Ryle's sermon "Never Perish," found at https://biblebb.com/files/ryle/never_perish.htm

⁴ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels, Luke* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1976), p. 58.