Fearing God Rightly (Lk. 12.1-7)
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In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. 2 Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 3 Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops. 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.

Introduction

To see the context of our text, Luke 12.1-7, we should back up a bit and read 11.53 through 12.1: As he went away from there [from a private meal where Jesus excoriated a group of religious leaders], the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, 54 lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say. 12.1 In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Luke reports that Jesus gave this warning about leaven to his disciples first. The context of crowds swelling by the thousands and trampling on each other ties this scene with the events that took place before the private meal with the Pharisees and lawyers. Previously, the crowds began to increase (11.29) and the people (like their leaders) voiced opposition by attributing the works of Christ to Beelzebul, the prince of demons (11.15). Now the crowds are trampling one another, which suggests something much stronger than being so close that they merely stepped on each other’s feet. Surely, they did step on each other, but the wording by Luke indicates distain and contempt, so, he is giving a picture of this evil generation as restless and contemptuous in nature, and thus, toward each other and especially toward Jesus. In this way, Luke sets the stage for the teaching of Jesus that now begins with the disciples. There is meanness among huge crowds surrounding them and the religious leaders spearhead that meanness. The temporal indicator in 12.1, meanwhile (in the meantime) shows that the meanness of the crowds has within it (at the same time) the virtual stalking of Jesus by the Pharisees who poked and prodded Him tying to catch him in something he might say (11.54). This context of growing resistance from disturbed crowds and malicious leaders “armed with cruel hate” leads naturally to the subject of our text for this morning: fear, the leitmotif that reoccurs in contrasting ways throughout the passage.

Therefore, my title for the unit of 12.1-7 is “Fearing God Rightly” and I detect two rich imperatives: fear the leaven of the Pharisees but not their power, and fear the power of God but not His providence.

I. Connected to men, Jesus says, fear the leaven of the Pharisees but not their power

The Lord Jesus gives us a rich perspective on fear, which is complicated. You can have the wrong kind and the right kind of fear, good and bad, healthy and unhealthy fear. If you are ever looking for perspective on the subject of fear, well, this text in the Gospel of Luke is a great place to begin.

There is an interesting play on words, perhaps, irony in the passage. Jesus says that you are to fear the leaven of the Pharisees, but not the Pharisees themselves, fear God but do not fear Him, and fear the day of judgment without fearing it.
In 12.1-4, fear is connected first to men: Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. 2 Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 3 Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops. 4 I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.

The hypocrisy that Jesus condemns so severely is like leaven that does its work in secret. It refers to word and deed inconsistency of holiness, righteousness, and truth in which emphasis is on outward appearance versus inward reality. The influence of hypocrites penetrates, contaminates, and corrupts in a secretive way (not obviously but subtly and deceptively). So, disciples need to be alert, even fearful, regarding the insidious nature of hypocrisy.

Reason to fear the leaven of the Pharisees is compound. The hidden things of the heart (the truth inside the whitewashed tomb) will be revealed and loudly proclaimed in the bright light of final judgment. Therefore, disciples are enjoined to guard against emulating the sins of the heart (like greed, wickedness, 11.39, uncleanness, and lawlessness, Mat 23.27-28) that are left buried there and suppressed. Since it is foolish to try to keep the truth hidden, since it will be made known, then do no go down the path of hypocrisy. It is important to recognize the reality, that whatever we suppress and refuse to face openly now will be fully disclosed on the Day of Judgment. This perspective merits genuine fear, the kind that is beneficial. This is a healthy way to be afraid.

Although contact with hypocrites ought to cause us to have a healthy fear of their insidious practices, nevertheless, Jesus makes it plain that we are not to fear them. It does not matter how much power and authority they have as religious leaders. It does not matter how skilled they may be in promoting their status by killing people. This does not matter because that is all they can do and, strikingly to be sure, being killed is not something to worry about: I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do (12.4). Note that Jesus speaks of killing the body. Of course, that means killing someone, but it quietly makes the point that the person is more than his body. Life is much more than the body, food, drink, and clothing. God-hating people may oppose Jesus and His disciples, but they cannot lift a finger against their well-being, against their full personhood, against their standing before God, or against their resurrection to the glory of heaven. Granted, we instinctively fear death, and it is a fearful state of affairs when evil humans hold our lives in their hands, but the word of Jesus echos strongly in our ears to comfort us: on one hand, do not fear evil people who have power to kill the body, but who have no more power than that. On the other hand, fear the leaven of their hypocrisy lest you absorb that contaminant into your blood stream.

II. Connected to God, Jesus says, fear the power of God but not His providence

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 (12.5-7). Two points emerge back to back: disciples have good reason to fear God and they have no need to fear Him.

1) First, disciples have good reason to fear God

Jesus gives another warning that should instill fear of God because He has the power of death in the fullest sense regarding the whole person and his total well-being beyond the grave: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell (12.5). God has the power to kill and the authority to condemn people to hell. This is a fearful thought; the most fear-filled thought that I can imagine. This teaching causes the mind to go numb. When this thought soaks into the emotions, they are drained dry, making it difficult for a time to feel anything else. Hell is the
great, sobering threat that hangs over us in all of our existence on this earth. It is an evil trick to soften the word for eternal punishment (hell) by the commonality of cursing (i.e. “go to hell” or “to hell with you”). Hell refers to the awful reality that looms on the horizon of the last day. History has an appointed end. All of us face aging, dying, and death, even if we are spared death at the hands of hateful men. Therefore, knowing that God has the authority to cast into hell ought to cause us to fear the Lord on bended knee with wonder, respect, reverence, and awe.

2) Second, disciples have no need to fear God

Jesus says, 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 (12.6-7).

Thus, if you are God’s disciple, then your death is not a doorway into hell because of His providential love for you. His love for you is so comprehensive that He knows every hair on your head in a caring way (He lovingly knows and numbers them, however many or few there may be). The part represents the whole. This numbering of each strand of hair, whatever their threadlike tininess, reveals the depth and detail of God’s providential love for those who learn the word at the feet of Jesus. Accordingly, He knows all the details about you from the inside out with intimate knowledge, which means that He values you highly with loving-care. He cares for your safety in its entirety: body and soul, before His holy tribunal, and against the threat of eternal punishment in hell. Therefore, submissive disciple learner, you have no need to fear the one who is a consuming fire (Heb 12.28-29).

Conclusion

Let’s collect our thoughts by some reflection on the following: hypocrites, hell, fear, promise, and worship.

1) Hypocrites

Deep down hypocrites are unresponsive to God; they do not see, hear, or speak for God. They turn God’s Law into legalism. They reveal hatred of God by rejecting His messengers. They utterly fail to use the key to knowledge, which is loving self-surrender to God. What is at the core then in being a hypocrite? At the core is the failure of true goodness, which means that a hypocrite does not love God, seek His glory, or live with sincere openness to His guiding word.

Therefore, love for God is most important and central. To love God means walking with Him in humble submission and thereby loving to show kindness to others. These are the things that matter most. By contrast, hypocrites do not have true love for God though it may appear otherwise on the surface! They practice no submission of themselves to the Lord Jesus, the genuine kind that manifests itself concretely in humble submission to others (children to parents, wives to husbands, Christians to pastors, and so forth).

2) Hell

Knowing that God has the authority to cast into hell ought to cause us to fear the Lord on our faces at His feet in silence with wonder, respect, reverence, and awe. This silence can only be broken by weeping with tears, not of terror, but of gratitude and joy.

Meditation on hell cleanses our perspective on life. It does so, however difficult it may be to let it into our thoughts and keep it there for any sustained amount of time. How then can anyone live free from this threat; hell is what we deserve?

There is only one answer to complete cleansing and absolute protection from being cast into hell. That answer is Jesus who, in perfect submission to God without hypocrisy, gave
Himself in death to endure the suffering of hell in our place, to make us clean, pure, holy, and blameless in resurrection glory.

So, to whom is the promise of providential love given? It is given to disciples. If you are God’s disciple, a learner with an open and submissive heart to His word in total, in detail, and in spirit, then your death is not a doorway into hell.

3) Fear

There is healthy fear about the heart, about matters of the heart because the heart matters most in walking with God. There is no hiding of things from God; no concealing really works: Nothings is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops (Lk 12.2-3). This perspective merits genuine fear, the kind that is beneficial. The cautionary to Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees should provoke a sense of fear about dishonesty before God and in relationship with other people.

4) Promise

To live without hypocrisy is liberating and freeing. You can live honestly before others when you are willing to have your heart is exposed before God by the light of His word. Then, there is no longer any need to put on a front or be preoccupied with your image. What others may think means nothing compared with what God thinks and knows.

Of course, pride gets in the way of truth and openness, and it is utter folly to let pride prevent you from exposure before God and before His family. Confess your sin; see it for what it is; identify it for what it is, as first a matter of heart attitude, of true openheartedness.

A marvel: you can submit to exposure before other people when you know how to be exposed before God without fearing Him, His power to kill, and His right to cast you into hell.

5) Worship

Combining the themes of hypocrisy, hell, and providence leads directly to an examination of how you worship. Consider this injunction from the Holy Spirit in the book of Hebrews: Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12.28-29). In line with the topic of hypocrisy and its opposite, openheartedness before God and others, you should ask yourself, “Is my worship acceptable to God when I gather with His people? Am I truly grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken and for the forgiveness of my sins? Do I worship the Lord with reverence and awe knowing that He is to be feared because He is a consuming fire, but with thankfulness knowing that I have no need to fear because I trust in Christ with an open heart of self-surrender and submission? Finally, in my worship, is what others see and hear, governed primarily, not by what others may think, but by what pleases God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?”

May we fall down before the majesty of God who is a consuming fire, may the Holy Spirit grant us the comfort of being exposed by His word without fear because we confess with our mouths what we truly believe in our hearts that Jesus is the risen Lord, and thus, by the blessing of the Holy Spirit may the meditations of our hearts and the words of our mouths be pleasing in His sight to the glory of the triune God, amen.