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CONFESSING OR DENYING CHRIST?

Luke 12:1-12

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Luke Lesson 58

Confessing or Denying Christ? Luke 12:1-12

Persecution is not something that American Christians know much about firsthand, but it may be coming our way soon. I heard on the news last week that the President is pushing a bill in Congress that would make it a hate crime to speak in any way against homosexuality or to promote negative attitudes toward it.

California's new governor has voiced support for a sweeping pro-homosexual bill that would, among other things, require that children in public schools, starting in kindergarten, be taught that homosexuality is simply one among several equally healthy and valid lifestyles (*World* [4/10/99], p. 18). It is not inconceivable that churches will be threatened, at minimum, with the loss of our tax-exempt status if we stand against such laws. In the not-too-distant future, pastors and other Christians could face prison sentences for taking a stand on what the Bible plainly teaches.

Whether we face severe persecution or mere social rejection, we all need to think carefully about the question, "Would I confess Christ under pressure or would I deny Him?" It is not a minor issue, because Jesus declares that our eternal destiny hinges on our confession of Him.

The context for Jesus' remarks is the hostility that resulted from His denunciation of the Jewish leaders (11:37-54). A huge crowd gathered, with so many people that they were stepping on each other. Jesus spoke primarily to His disciples, but in the hearing of all, warned them about the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. He was drawing a line: people could follow the leadership of the Pharisees or they could follow Him. But they must make a choice and stick with it in the face of potential persecution and even death. To try to straddle the line will bring a person into ultimate and final judgment. Thus,

We must beware of hypocrisy and confess Christ, even unto death, because hypocrites will face God's judgment.

Clearly, Jesus believed that our words and deeds are significant in the light of eternity. Also, we must understand that Jesus' warnings were directed primarily toward those who professed allegiance to Him. We would be foolish to shrug off His words as if they only applied to the unbeliever. He spoke first to His disciples, although it also applies to everyone. Jesus first gives the negative warning against the sin of hypocrisy, which is the same as denying Him; but Jesus also gives positive encouragement to confess Him, even if it results in martyrdom.

1. We must beware of the sin of hypocrisy because hypocrites will face God's eternal judgment.

Jesus was not fooled into mistaking momentary popularity for long-term acceptance. The crowds were thronging around Him, but He knew the propensity of human hearts, even of His disciples, toward hypocrisy.

- A. Hypocrisy is a real danger for those who profess to follow Christ.

The Greek word for hypocrisy referred to a mask used in acting. It means to lead people to believe that you are something you are not. The hypocrite's emphasis is on how others see him, not on how God sees him. Thus his focus is on the outward person, not on the heart. Jesus calls it leaven or yeast because it is subtle and insidious. Just as a small pinch of yeast will spread until it puffs up a large lump of dough, so a small amount of hypocrisy tolerated in our lives will spread until it contaminates us totally.

In Galatians 2:13, Paul charged Peter and Barnabas with hypocrisy because they openly ate with Gentile believers, but when the Judaizers came to town, they suddenly withdrew out of fear of what the Judaizers would think. If such godly, strong leaders as Peter and Barnabas were susceptible to hypocrisy, then it is a sin that we all need to be on guard against!

- B. Hypocrisy is a danger because we are prone to please people at the expense of pleasing God.

The Pharisees were hypocrites because they lived with a view to popular acclaim, but they did not live in view of God, especially on the heart level. We all like to be liked and we don't want to offend anyone. So it's easy to tell people what they want to hear

rather than to be completely honest. And if people get a little better impression of us than is warranted, we let it go by because we want them to think highly of us. We all face a strong tendency to please men whom we can see, but to ignore God whom we cannot see. But Jesus points out the fallacy of this, because the God whom we cannot see, sees everything!

I'm not suggesting that to avoid hypocrisy we should be blunt or offensive toward people. We should be kind and sensitive, even when we need to confront. Nor am I saying that we need to tell everyone all of our private sins or faults in order to avoid hypocrisy. Obviously, we need to be discerning about those in whom we confide. But we must avoid deliberately misleading people into thinking that we are something we know we're not. We should seek to be lovingly truthful in every situation, realizing that God knows our very thoughts.

- C. Hypocrisy is a danger because we fear what people will do to us if we take a stand for Christ.

Jesus says, "I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do" (12:4). That's an interesting perspective: "The worst that they can do is kill you!" "Oh, whew! I thought maybe they could *really* do some damage!" Most of us have not had to deal with any kind of physical torture or death threats. It's hard enough to maintain our testimony when we worry about what others will *think* of us, let alone if they threaten us with bodily harm! But if we focus on what people may do to us, whether it is just social rejection or whether it is physical torture and death, we will deny Christ when the pressure is on. So Jesus points us to a supreme danger that should scare us into avoiding hypocrisy:

- D. Hypocrisy is a danger because it results in eternal judgment for the hypocrite.

The judgment spoken of here involves each member of the godhead, which should cause us to consider it with the utmost care.

- Hypocrites will be judged by the Father (12:5).

Jesus says that rather than fearing those who can kill us, but do nothing further, we should "fear the One who after He has

killed has authority to cast into hell.” Then, to emphasize an already strong point, Jesus repeats, “Yes, I tell you, fear Him!” The word “hell” is the Greek *gehenna*, which came from the Hebrew for the Valley of Hinnom, where the idolatrous Jews had offered their children in the fire to the pagan god, Molech. Later it became a garbage dump and a place where criminals’ bodies were thrown to be burned. The smoke rose perpetually as the garbage was slowly burned. Thus the name came to be used as a description of the place of eternal torment, “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48).

Believe me, I didn’t invent the idea of such a place as hell and I don’t even like it! But I can’t believe in Jesus and deny hell, since He spoke so plainly about it. If you say, “I don’t believe in a God who would send anyone to hell,” keep in mind that your believing or not believing has absolutely nothing to do with whether such a God exists! Whether you believe in Him or not, God has revealed Himself to us through His Son, Jesus. If you reject Jesus and His teaching about hell, you run the great risk that what He said was true. If it is true, you will be in big trouble on judgment day!

- Hypocrites will be judged by the Son (12:9).

If a person denies Jesus before men, He states that He will deny that person before the angels of God. Obviously Jesus was not talking about a person who occasionally fails by denying Him. If He meant that, then Peter will not be in heaven! But if our way of life is to profess Christ when we’re around the Christian crowd, but to deny Christ when we’re around the pagans, we are being hypocrites. If we do not repent and take a stand with Christ, no matter what the cost, then He will deny us at the judgment.

- Hypocrites will be judged by the Holy Spirit (12:10).

Verse 10 has caused a lot of confusion and anxiety! They *are* scary words! Many people worry that perhaps they have committed the unpardonable sin. Jesus states that if a person speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him, but that the person who blasphemes the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven. What did He mean?

First, it is helpful to consider what Jesus did *not* mean. Clearly, He did not mean that a person, whether a pagan *not* a professing

Christian, who utters a word of blasphemy in a moment of temptation is forever beyond the reach of God's grace. Peter horribly denied Christ and yet was restored. Paul says that he formerly was a blasphemer, yet he was shown mercy (1 Tim. 1:13). When Jesus drew a distinction between speaking a word against the Son of Man and a word against the Holy Spirit, He did not mean that somehow the Son of Man is not on the same level as the Spirit. The verse just before shows that if a person denies Christ, that person will be denied at the judgment. Rather, He was drawing a distinction between the level of the offense.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to bear witness to Jesus Christ (John 15:26) by convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). During Jesus' life on earth, the Holy Spirit bore witness especially through the miracles that Christ performed. The Jewish leaders, however, attributed those miracles to the power of Satan, not to the power of the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:22-30). This was the unpardonable sin, because these leaders had sufficient evidence from the Spirit that Jesus was the Messiah, yet they hardened their hearts against Him. This was not a case of men attributing Jesus' miracles to Satan on any one occasion, but rather of men who set their whole lives and hearts against the witness of the Spirit to Jesus Christ. To turn away from the light God gives results in a searing of the conscience and hardening of the heart that has no remedy. Such a person has no capacity to repent.

Can this sin be committed today? Some argue that since it specifically involved attributing Jesus' miracles to Satan, it could only be committed during His life on earth. But it seems to me that the warnings of Scripture are applicable today, even if the exact sense cannot be duplicated. In other words, a person today can repeatedly turn his heart away from the witness of the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ until he reaches a point where he is hardened beyond remedy. God only knows when a person crosses that line, but the point is, unbelief is nothing to fool around with. If the Holy Spirit has been convicting a person of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and has been showing the person that Jesus Christ is God's anointed Savior, but the person rejects that witness, then he is on the path toward the unpardonable sin. He is in grave danger that God will withdraw the light he has been given and he will be hardened in unbelief. That is the unpardonable sin.

So the lesson for us is, if the Spirit of God is tugging on your heart, do not resist Him! If He is drawing you toward Jesus Christ, but the lure of sin is drawing you the other direction, yield to Jesus Christ! Otherwise, you may cross the line and your time of opportunity will be lost forever!

Thus Jesus' words here show us that we must beware of hypocrisy because we will stand before God for eternal judgment.

2. We must confess Christ, even unto death, because we will stand before God for eternal judgment.

To be a hypocrite is to deny Christ. The opposite is to confess Christ. Jesus speaks very tenderly to His followers here, calling them His friends (12:4) and assuring them of the Father's loving care (12:6, 7). He promises that if we confess Him before men, He will confess us before the angels of God. So, what does it mean to confess Him?

To confess Christ means to proclaim to others the fact that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord and that our salvation is all from Him and not at all from us. Other Scriptures show that we do this initially through baptism, where we publicly confess that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:16; examples in Acts, e.g., 16:33). Then, through both our lives and our words, we openly acknowledge that we are followers of Jesus Christ and that He has saved us by His grace, apart from anything we have done. If Jesus Christ has truly saved you, then you will be a different person. You will be growing in righteousness, love, and truth. You will judge and confess your sins. When opportunities come up to tell others of the great love and mercy of the Savior, you will do it because of your gratitude to Him for saving you.

Don't miss the fact that Jesus here not only accepts, but also openly promotes, His own preeminence. He states that every person's eternal destiny hinges on his or her confession of Jesus! As Leon Morris puts it, "Jesus leaves His hearers in no doubt but that eternal issues are involved in their attitude to Him" (*Luke* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 210). Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. One who has truly been saved will openly confess that fact.

The question then is, *How do we confess Christ, especially in the face of persecution?*

- A. To confess Christ, we must remember that all of life is lived under the Father's gaze.

This is the thrust of Jesus' words in 12:2-3. Hypocrites live double lives, acting one way when they're around the religious crowd, but living a different way when they're alone. But that's not a smart policy if there is an omniscient God who knows every thought we have. Genuine Christianity is a matter of the heart and it must be lived openly before the God who knows everything about us (Ps. 139). When we sin even in our thoughts, we must confess it to Him. Then, with the inner person cleansed and with an awareness of His presence, we will be able to confess Christ openly to others.

- B. To confess Christ, we must fear the judgment of God more than we fear the judgment of men.

Jesus here tenderly addresses His followers as His friends. To be the friend of Jesus is far better than to be the foe of evil men. He tells us not to be afraid of those who can kill the body, but after that can do no more. Rather, we are to fear God who has the authority not only to kill our bodies, but also to cast our souls into hell. Some Christians say that we should always be positive and that we should only focus on God's love. But, clearly, Jesus did not agree with that. Here He uses the fear of God's judgment as a strong motivation for believers. We may fear rejection or even persecution by men. But we need to fear rejection and the ultimate persecution by God!

This is a basic lesson that every man who teaches or preaches God's Word must come to grips with. If you want everyone to like you and sing your praises, you will be unfaithful to God's Word. The apostle Paul said (Gal. 1:10), "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ." He also said (1 Thess. 2:3-4), "For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts." You simply cannot be faithful to the message of the cross or to the holiness of God without stepping on some toes, no matter how

tactfully you present it. So a basic requirement of every preacher and teacher is, you must fear God more than you fear men.

But, what if men not only reject or slander us? What if they actively persecute us?

C. To confess Christ, we must trust in the loving, providential care of the Father.

After telling us to fear God, Jesus tenderly tells us of His providential care for us and then says, "Do not fear" [men]. He uses two illustrations to show us how much God cares for those who confess the name of His Son. The first is that of sparrows. Five sparrows were sold for two cents. In Matthew 10:29 He states that two sparrows were sold for a cent. If you bought four for two cents, they threw the fifth one in for free! Even though sparrows were of such little value to men, Jesus says that not one of them is forgotten before God. Jesus assures us, "You are of more value than many sparrows."

Then Jesus tells us that God has numbered all the hairs of our head. In my case, God is good at subtraction! Jesus means that the smallest details of our lives are under the tender care of our heavenly Father. Contrary to modern "Christian" psychology, these verses are not teaching that we should esteem ourselves more highly than we do. Rather, we should esteem God more highly because of His fatherly care for us, in spite of our many sins and shortcomings. But, Jesus does want us as God's children to feel assured in His loving care for us. No one can lay a finger on us apart from the Father's permission. If wicked men kill us, we have His promise, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones" (Ps. 116:15). Knowing that the Father cares for us, we can bear witness even toward those who are hostile to us.

D. To confess Christ, we must count on the faithful promises of the Son.

Jesus promises that if we confess Him on earth, He will confess us in heaven (12:8). Every Christian should live every day in light of someday standing before the One who gave His life for us. Our great hope should be that we will hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Then any suffering or rejection we have experienced will be worth it all!

E. To confess Christ, we must rely on the instructive ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus warns His followers that they will be brought before religious and governmental authorities because of their stand for Him. But He says that we should not worry about what we will say at such times, because the Holy Spirit will instruct us at the moment when we need His wisdom. These comments apply to any time that we are under fire for our testimony. If we have been living for Christ and walking in the Spirit, we can rely on the Spirit to give us wisdom to respond in the moment of pressure.

Conclusion

Thomas Cranmer served faithfully as Archbishop of Canterbury under kings Henry VIII and Edward VI in England. But when Bloody Mary came to the throne, he was condemned to death for treason and heresy. He was forced to watch as Hugh Latimer and Nicolas Ridley were burned at the stake in Oxford. The fear of such a painful death caused Cranmer to recant his Protestant views and to sign a paper that he agreed with the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation. But even though he recanted, the Catholics planned to burn him anyway. On the eve of his execution, he was brought before the church where he was expected to acknowledge publicly his shift toward Rome. But he shocked his enemies when he suddenly renounced his recantation, declared the Pope to be antichrist, and rejected transubstantiation.

Then, with a light heart and a clear conscience, he allowed himself to be hurried to the stake amidst the outcries of his disappointed enemies. As the flames curled around him, he boldly held out his right hand into the fire, the hand that had signed his recantation, and said, "This unworthy right hand," while he held his left hand up toward heaven as he perished in the flames (J. C. Ryle, *Light From Old Times* [Evangelical Press], pp. 35-38).

Hopefully, none of us will have to face such a tortuous death. But, if we do, the way to be ready to confess Christ under such pressure is to be confessing Him now. What is a little rejection or ridicule, or even physical death, in the light of eternal life with our glorious Lord? May we boldly confess our loving Savior who bore our sins on the cross!

Discussion Questions

1. When does keeping certain personal matters private cross the line into hypocrisy? How honest should we be?
2. What is the difference between being diplomatic and being a people-pleaser?
3. How can a naturally timid person overcome his or her fear of people in order to confess Christ publicly?
4. Should a Christian fear committing the unpardonable sin? Is it possible for a believer to apostatize?

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