

Fear of Man or Fear of God?

Fear of Man

Last week we studied and became part of a very difficult dinner conversation. Jesus and the Pharisees went head to head. Our Lord declared six woes upon the religious leaders of the day because they were more concerned with hypocritical traditions of men that they were with the commands of God. In essence they cared more about what they looked like to people than what they looked like to God.

Shortly afterwards, Jesus is out in the street teaching among the multitude and the topic is still the same. Let us begin in prayer and then when our hearts are prepared, we will listen to what Jesus wants to teach us this morning. PRAY.

Our passage begins this morning with chaos, please turn in your Bible to Luke chapter 12, beginning at verse 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.’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.”

Notice in verse 1, Jesus is addressing His disciples even though He is in the midst of a very large multitude, literally the Greek word *urias* (moo·ree·as) translated as “thousands” means ten thousand or more. The crowd was pressing in

and trampling one another to see and hear Jesus. Reminds me of the crowds who wait outside a store all night because the store is going to have a special price on toys for Christmas and as the doors are opened in the early morning people pour in; pushing and people are knocked down and fights break out as the people shove everyone out of the way to get what they have come for. Yet, Jesus, in the midst of this turmoil turns to his disciples huddled around him to teach them while he ignores the thousands. Jesus is focused and the turmoil will not deter him.

What is so important that Jesus would turn from this crowd and address the disciples? First, Jesus is training the disciples because they will be his leaders, church planters, preachers and missionaries when he soon returns to the right hand of God the Father. The crowd was there to get; miracles, signs and wonders, and always wanted more. The disciples, on the other hand, are being prepared to be the ones who lead and give and serve. Jesus wanted the disciples to understand how to avoid the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. It is so vital that the disciples and we, my beloved, need to avoid hypocrisy because it spreads like leaven or yeast in the dough; it literally will influence everything it touches. Jesus strongly says, **“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”** So, this statement brings to all of us a question, “Whose opinion do you value?” The leaven or hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who put on a front of religiosity but in truth value man’s opinion and favor or do we value God above all else! This is commonly referred to as *fear of man*. This is why the Pharisees prayed in public and plotted in private. People saw the public display, but God sees all and knows the very heart of men. As the Apostle Matthew recorded, Jesus’ words, **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”** (Matthew 6:1) And later, Jesus says, **“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat,³ so do and observe**

whatever they tell you, **but not the works they do.** For they preach, but do not practice. ... ⁵ **They do all their deeds to be seen by others.**" (Matthew 23:2-3, 5)

They were hypocrites who preached one thing and practiced another and fooled many of the people. Centuries later Abraham Lincoln spoke of the foolishness of hypocrisy, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." So, hypocrisy not only infects others but it is utter foolishness because the truth will come out at some point and the hypocrite is left with nothing. When this happens, it exposes the truth which is of God, for nothing escapes God and his truth is eternal.

Jesus continues with teaching his disciples that one cannot hide sin, saying in verse 2, "Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." All hypocrites will someday be discovered. In the end all the secrets of a false teachers, Pharisees, evangelists, pastors, politicians, business and society leaders will be uncovered, if not by men, certainly by God. When someone fears man, they think that sins can be hidden. They think sin can be covered up. What they fail to take into account is the everywhere presence and the all-knowing nature of God. Just because a person can hide things from people and trick people into thinking well of them, we must never think for a second God is fooled. This foolishness was true of the Pharisees and it is true of the world leaders all through history and it is true of the hypocritical political leaders of our day. Let me not neglect the religious leaders and churches who have and are more concerned about control, power and fear men more than God and therefore, have corrupted the Word of God and who they say God is.

Hypocrisy spreads like cancer, it is futile, and it always promises much, thus its popularity, but it fails to deliver. Even though it fails to deliver as promised, the

prince of this world simply pivots and takes people another direction for a time and then pivots again. As Winston Churchill said to the British House of Commons in 1948, **“Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it.”** My beloved, nothing has changed since the fall of Adam and corruption came into the world. Yes, technology has advanced, but the heart of mankind has not. One either holds all things up to the light of the Word of God or to the dark corruption of this world. At times, we meet those, who call themselves “Christian”, but as one sits back and observes, what one sees, is that some, in truth are Pharisees. If we hold people to the light of God’s Word we not fooled and their efforts come to nothing for those who truly belong to God. This is why Jesus invested so much time with his disciples and teaches them by everything he does, because Jesus knew that the temptation the Pharisees encountered and gave into was not unique and these same temptations would be experienced by his disciples and even beyond that - by all who God calls; including all of us. It is only by the power of God the Holy Spirit and the Word of God that one can overcome these temptations.

The fear of man produces hypocrisy and hypocrisy increases one’s fear and as fear increases, one fights with increased energy to keep their hypocrisy from being exposed and by these actions one becomes a slave to fear. This fear then dominates a person and they will do whatever it takes to maintain their false image before men; they will lie, steal, cheat and work to destroy anyone they see as a threat. If this aggressive approach does not work and as a last resort, they will withdraw to maintain the illusion in their own mind that they are seen by men as special. If one belongs to the world, they would rather live in the shadows and self-illusion than the light because in the light of truth, they will be exposed and if they are exposed, they will be discovered as a hypocrite. Look at the discoveries of truth about our politicians lately and how it is all spun into half-truths, which are lies,

and made to seem something different than they truly are. These people feel if you tell a lie often enough and long enough and with enough conviction, people will come to believe it to be true. Their truth becomes a moving target because they are always pivoting. This has also been true of some religious leaders and the world relishes when they are exposed and fall; for the world desires to discredit God. The plain truth is all these acts are sin. This was the type of sin the Pharisees were living at the time of Jesus and it continues to this very day. The fear of men enslaves one to the prince of this world and these people are living in sin. The old saying is still true; misery loves company.

Fear of God

The fear of men is a fear of exposure that people might see the real person. The fear of God begins with sinful people not wanting to be accountable, being afraid one will not be able to live up to God's standards. Jesus wants people not to have fear, meaning; dread, anxiety, distress, trepidation and apprehension for these come with the fear of men. To fear God, one gains peace, for the fear of God means; awe, respect, reverence and worship. Think of this as I read verses 4 to 7, "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." The problem is, since the fall our sinful nature has corrupted our emotions. The fear that we should have toward God has been suppressed by human pride and arrogance. We must fight against the natural inclination to disregard the things of God. People reason that they have all the time in the world to determine where they stand with God or they reason that it is not all

that important; the tasks of the day take priority or that God will always be there to forgive because he is a loving God. People think and at times we think, these wrong ideas because we mistakenly think we are in charge and we do not understand the movement of time and the coming return of Christ.

This reminds me of C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, an allegory about Christ and those who follow him. It comes time for Susan and Lucy to prepare to meet Aslan the lion, who represents Christ. They have been guided by two talking animals, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. As Mr. and Mrs. Beaver prepare the children to meet Aslan, we read this conversation, "Ooh," said Susan, "I thought ~~he~~ *Aslan* was a man. Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie," said Mrs. Beaver, "and make no mistake, if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knee's knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver, "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course, he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you!" *The Lion, the Witch & The Wardrobe* (Penguin, 1950) Because Jesus is good and he is king, believers come to know the peace Christ gives even in difficult times. We can believe what Jesus says because he is eternally true, he tells believers, *My "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."* (John 14:27) If you fear God and not man you will know this peace.

Unbelievers think they have control over their own destiny. Jesus tells believers not to fear death or those who have the power to just kill the body. Unbelievers have a great fear of men and because of this they value this life more than the life to come. They fear other people with dread, anxiety, distress, trepidation and apprehension. They fear death, so they think the solution is to gain

a position of power over others, but they do not realize there is always someone or a group of people more powerful than they. Death comes to all, but the unbeliever dies a second death, while believers live forever with God.

Rather than fearing those who can just take our lives, we should fear the One who has control over the destiny of our souls. To fear God, one gains peace, for the fear of God means; awe, respect, reverence and worship. One needs to move from fear of men; only God is to be feared because He alone has control over our souls. He alone can kill the body and send someone to hell. To fear God means one cares immensely what he thinks. It is to obey Him out of reverence before we obey anyone else. As Apostle John wrote, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ ... God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because **as he is so also are we in this world.** ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.” (John 4:15-19) It is God who calls, equips and enables a person to begin to understand ‘agape’ or unconditional love, because Jesus has unconditional love for all who place their faith in him.

In verses 6 and 7, Jesus shows us an amazing twist of human reasoning and of the truth of God. “**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.**” The logic that Jesus wants us to understand goes like this: God is to be feared because He has the power to cast you into hell or lift you to heaven. God is always present and all knowing, He is aware when the least little thing happens, like were every sparrow is in the world. God is very much aware of you in even the smallest details. When we fear

and worship God, we do not need to fear anything else. Again, the old adage; “Fear God and fear not” remains true

Jesus now gives two examples of what fearing God and not fearing man looks like. Reading beginning at verse 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.**”

The first example is that proper fear of God produces bold confession in believers. Again, look at verses 8 and 9, “**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.**” Question, “How does one know if they fear man over God?” Answer, “If one lacks a witness.” If one does not share the Gospel with unbelievers; they fear man. When God saves a person, it is a miracle and he gives them a testimony and one purpose of a person’s testimony is it is to be used to share the Gospel of Christ with others. Do you love sharing with others who Jesus Christ is and what he has done in your life or are you a secret believer because you fear man? I have asked you questions, but now ask yourself, “Do I share my faith with others on a regular basis? If the answer is “no”, then, this exposes where your fear lies. A mark of a true follower of Jesus Christ is a mindset of evangelism towards the lost.

The second example of proper fear of God is found in verses 10 to 12, “**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.”** The fear and awe of God produces bold proclamation and declaration of the gospel.

We have now traveled full circle in our Lord’s teaching on fear and hypocrisy. Only one who fears God would ever be brought before officials and rulers because of the name of Christ. A person who cowers in fear of man would never be arrested for preaching and teaching Christ in the public arena, because they will not. If you do boldly proclaim the gospel, understand that you do not need to fear man because of God’s provision. He will give you the words to say in that very hour.

Stephen had a great fear, awe and love of God and did not fear man. The apostles were overwhelmed with all the needs of the people who had come to believe in Christ. In Acts chapter 6 we learn Stephen is chosen, “**a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,**”^(v.5) by the Apostles to serve as a Deacon. Stephen’s faith produced a deep love for Christ and a servant’s heart. He will serve as a deacon, organizing so the needs of the people were met. Because of Stephen’s faith verse 8 tells us, “**Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.**” Stephen was bold, yet humble and feared God and this led him into conflict with the hypocrites, the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees. He is arrested and God gives him the words to share and his defense to put forth. The Sanhedrin were hypocrites, who feared man, not God. To keep from being exposed for what they truly were - they had Stephen executed by stoning. As the first martyr of

Christ's church, Stephen modeled as Jesus had taught; He commits his spirit to Jesus, just as Jesus had committed his Spirit to the Father in Luke 23 and he dies asking forgiveness for his prosecutors, just as Jesus did, saying, **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”** (v. 35) We, too, will speak boldly, like Stephen, when the time comes if we fear God and not man.

Jesus was not popular with the leadership of Israel and today, Christians are not popular with our society. Here is the dividing of the goats and the sheep; a hypocrite like the Pharisees would never go against society and its leaders. A person who fears man would never go against what society wants. Only a committed follower of Christ would humbly speak the truth in love when it is unpopular.

My beloved, I pray we would be a church who fears God and not man. I pray we are a church who will stand up for our Lord, a people who love Him over all things and are willing to sacrifice, if needed, for the message of the Gospel. All through the New Testament we read of those who sacrificed for the cause of Christ; some were miraculously spared to the glory of God, like Peter and John in Acts chapter 4 as they appeared before the Sanhedrin. We know from John 21, that Peter would be martyred and tradition says he was crucified upside-down; Peter's death brought God glory, just as John living to an old age and writing Revelation brought God glory. The life of every saint, lived for the glory of God, in fear and awe and worship of God, proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, brings God glory and pours out the Light of God into a dark and lost world. My beloved, let us live in fear of God and not man! Let us go from here and be God's light to the spiritually dark world. Amen!