

STUDY ON THE TEACHING OF JESUS

PERSECUTION & BLASPHEMY

Read Luke 12:4-12

Don't Fear Your Persecution (vv4-5)

In this school of discipleship, Jesus wanted his disciples to assess the risks up-front. What is the worst that can happen? He asks. Death.

The worst that Jesus' opponents could do is to kill him -- and then kill his disciples. That's it. And then, incredibly, Jesus says, that's all: "... and after that can do no more" (verse 4).

One of the reasons we fear death is that we cannot see beyond it. Our worldview sees the present clearly and the afterlife with extreme fuzziness. But Jesus is teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God. He is teaching them not to fear death. The writer of Hebrews states:

"Since, therefore, [these His] children share in flesh and blood [in the physical nature of human beings], He [Himself] in a similar manner partook of the same [nature], that by [going through] death He might bring to nought and make of no effect him who had the power of death—that is, the devil—And also that He might deliver and completely set free all those who through the [haunting] fear of death were held in bondage throughout the whole course of their lives." (Hebrews 2:14-15 AMPC)

My dear friend, fear of death is natural, just as the fear of the unknown is natural. But Jesus has taken away our fear of death. That's part of being like Jesus. It's part of our school of discipleship. All your persecutors can do is kill you, and God has ultimate power over the life and death of the believer. Therefore, we shouldn't fear our persecutors, but have a healthy respect of God that makes us more concerned with obeying Him than any man.

Fear God Instead

Some people would strongly disagree with Jesus at this point. Love, not fear, should be the Christian's primary motivator, they would say. Throughout the Bible the key phrase to indicate a person with faith in God is "God-fearing." We see that same phrase used in Luke, too:

"His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation." (1:50)

Jesus deals honestly with this basic human emotion of fear as he trains his disciples. Don't be overcome with your fear of men, he says. The most they can do is take your life; but your heavenly Father has power over eternal life, and that is much more important than physical life.

Throwing a Person into Hell

Yes, it is true. *"Fear him who ... has power to throw you into hell"* (Luke 12:5) The phrase can make some of us uncomfortable. The God, who is Love personified, also throws people into hell. The King James Version translates two words as "hell": hadēs, the Greek word for the place of the dead, the underworld, and gehenna, the place of punishment. Satan has neither the capability nor the right to throw people into hell. That is reserved to God. The word "throw" is the Greek word *emballō*, "throw (into)".

Should you fear God's wrath against sin? Should you fear the punishment of hell for your transgressions? Without the mercy and grace of God's forgiveness and forbearance, Jesus paints the picture of a fiery hell as the sure end of God's enemies.

Valuing Sparrows, Numbering Hairs (vv6-7)

Fear of God's wrath should not be the only motivator to help disciples deal with persecution and the threat of death. There is also God's love that cares for the whole as well as the details. Here Jesus talks about the monetary value of birds. We may eat chicken and turkey, but in Jesus' day some wild birds were sold as food. If cheap sparrows are not forgotten by God, how much more you, who *"are of more value than many sparrows"*.

Don't be afraid of what? Don't be afraid that God will forget you, abandon you. He won't. He can't. You are beloved by God and he can no more forget you than cut off part of himself. God spoke through the Prophet Isaiah when the people did fear that God had forsaken them:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely, they may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me." (**Isaiah 49:15-16**)

Do you fear the wrong things? Take heart from the Word of God that assures you that God will never leave or forsake you. He always has you in mind. He values you much more than sparrows whose life he also knows. To underscore his point, Jesus says, *"the very hairs of your head are all numbered."* Jesus wants us to know that God knows us intimately.

Acknowledging Jesus before Men (vv8-9)

Jesus is still speaking in terms of preparing his disciples -- and you and me -- to withstand the pressure of persecution. He is steadying us so that the fear of our persecutors does not cause us to deny our allegiance to Jesus. The word translated "acknowledge" (NIV) or "confess" (KJV) is Greek *homologeō*, "declare (publicly), acknowledge, confess", "declare allegiance to."

The mention of the angels of God indicates that the person who disowns Christ is irrevocably disowned and repudiated before the court of heaven at the final judgment. This must have been an awesome statement to believers who were threatened with death unless they would disown Jesus. Considering the subtle persecution to believers today especially in the western world, what would confessing Jesus before men look like? What would denying Jesus before men look like?

What Is the Unforgivable Sin? (v10)

This idea of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit has troubled many; there are many who feel totally defeated and hopeless before God, convinced that they have committed this unpardonable sin.

What exactly is this unforgivable or unpardonable sin? To understand this, we should turn to a parallel where the context is clearer. In Mark's Gospel, the saying is placed in the context of Jesus being accused of casting out demons by Beelzebub (Mark 3:22-30). The scribes accuse him of being possessed by Beelzebub, by an "evil spirit" (Mark 3:22, 30). Jesus says:

"Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness but is subject to eternal condemnation"— because they said, "He has an unclean spirit."." (**Mark 3:28-30**)

In other words, when men attribute to Satan the work of the Holy Spirit, they blaspheme the Holy Spirit. But I don't think that Christians mistaking the real thing for counterfeits have really committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. I've found that God is very gracious, and people often change their mind later.

I admit that the unforgivable sin is difficult to understand. But I am certain that any Christian who sincerely seeks to know God hasn't committed this sin. The longing for God is in itself the cry of the Spirit within saying, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:16; Galatians 4:6). If you had committed the unforgivable sin, you wouldn't be studying the bible and seeking to follow Jesus.

The Holy Spirit Will Help You Bear Witness (vv11-12)

There will be times when Christians faced with imprisonment or martyrdom are placed on trial for their faith. (Someone has asked probingly: "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?") The question isn't whether the Christians will get off and be released. The question is whether you will offer a good testimony for Jesus on that occasion, whether you will confess him clearly and boldly. Many who do confess him will be convicted and sentenced, but their boldness for Jesus will continue to echo in the ears of the onlookers and oppressors and will eventually bring some of them to faith. Jesus' own clear confession at his trial and crucifixion gives us an example. So does Stephen's clear testimony to Christ as Saul of Tarsus held the garments of those who stoned him to death (Acts 7). There is a powerful promise here, that the Holy Spirit will teach us (Greek *didaskō*) what we should say.

Learning how to act as Jesus' true disciples in situations of persecution and possible martyrdom is not fun. It may not even seem relevant to us in the comfortable West. It may not fit our theology. It is a sobering lesson at the very least. But it is so important that Jesus has repeated it so we his disciples won't miss it. It may be a lesson that you need to internalise right now for a crucial time you will face shortly. Who knows?

