

Right and Wrong Fear

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Date: 28 May 2017

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Neil. Good afternoon, everyone. Great to have you with us today. If you were here last week, you'll remember that we were listening to some pretty challenging words that the Lord Jesus said to the Pharisees, lots of woes as he went through.

This morning, we're in the same kind of area, just fairly shortly afterwards, and the Lord Jesus is again saying some very challenging words, but this time it's to his disciples. So the audience is different, and the emphasis is a bit different as well.

Because alongside the challenge, as Neil helpfully pointed out, there is encouragement and the knowledge that whatever difficult times we go through, that God is with us if we really fear him. So let's read together from Luke chapter 12. We're going to read the first 12 verses. Luke chapter 12, reading from verse 1. Here's what it says.

Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying, Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

[1 : 10] There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.

I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear.

Fear him, who after the killing of the body has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?

Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.

I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God.

[2 : 20] And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. But anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When you are brought before synagogue through as an authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say.

For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say. And pray that God will help us to understand his word and to apply it to our hearts today.

I was 13 years old when Arthur Blessett came to Edinburgh. Arthur Blessett is an American evangelist. He's best known because he goes everywhere carrying a cross.

He's in the Guinness Book of Records. He's been to 324 countries and territories around the world. And everywhere he goes, he has a cross with him. There he is in Edinburgh with it many years ago. Arthur Blessett first came to Edinburgh in 1971. He preached his first sermon at the foot of the mound to an audience of two. There was Ian Leach, a well-known evangelist in the city, and a teenage girl who he'd met when she was running away from home.

[3 : 31] I heard him a year later. And he came back. And by that time, he was really well-known in Edinburgh. And I can well remember standing outside a city centre church in a crowd that may well have numbered thousands, certainly a huge number of people, mostly young people.

And there was a real, real excitement and buzz about it. At one point, a window upstairs in the church opened. Arthur Blessett poked his head out and waved to us.

And everyone went absolutely mad. And I thought of this at the beginning of the week, as I read the beginning of this passage, where it talks about the crowd of many thousands who had gathered, so they were trampling on one another.

That's the only crowd of that kind of sort that I can ever remember being in and experiencing the excitement of. Then we had the bomb in Manchester on Monday.

And I thought about another crowd, a crowd of young people, mainly. And they were probably falling over themselves as they tried to escape. And what was there in their minds was not excitement at that point.

[4 : 42] It was fear, it was terror about what was going to happen to them. A very different kind of crowd and a very different kind of response.

And I thought, as I thought about the disciples in this passage, they may have had both of these emotions as they saw the crowd there. There was excitement.

The people were excited about Jesus. Now, when we think about this crowd, we have to remember Jesus is no longer on the hills and plains of Galilee, preaching in the open air to lots of people.

He's moved to Judea and he's in the streets of the city. And still there's a huge crowd, a different crowd. Still there's a huge crowd with him. And they're listening to him and they're engaged by what he has to say because what he has to say is radically different.

And for them it's quite exciting as he tears into the religious leaders and exposes their hypocrisy.

And I could see the disciples being really excited that the message that they were bringing and that they were giving, that the Lord Jesus was giving to the people, was hitting home and it was attracting so many to him.

[5 : 52] But alongside that, as we thought about last week, there were the religious leaders and they were so upset by what the Lord Jesus was doing that they were really out to get him and potentially anyone who followed him.

And so the disciples may well have been feeling, yes, this is in one way, it's very exciting, but in another way, actually, this is pretty dangerous for us. It's quite possible that we could go through times of persecution, that we could be dragged before the judges and religious courts because we are followers of Jesus.

And so Jesus, in this passage, he is trying both to challenge the disciples, not to get too excited and to get dragged into some of the things that would feature in the Pharisees and others in this world. He is also trying to encourage them and to say, be brave. Think of the things that really matter and don't get caught up in things which ultimately, although they're important, although they're difficult, although they would naturally make you afraid, ultimately, they're not the things that are really important.

And I think he really, in the first verse, he brings out what is going to be the key message of the whole passage when he says, be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

[7 : 20] The Lord Jesus is very aware that the religious establishment of his day, although they appeared good, although they appeared to be living lives that some would say, well, they're lives that are obedient to God.

They try to obey all the things in the law going beyond what the Old Testament would have to their own laws. They appeared to be good, but actually they were hypocrites.

A hypocrite is someone who wears a mask, someone who's something in one place and something totally different somewhere else. So the Pharisees in public, they were religious, they were holy people, they liked your parade, their goodness before others.

In private, their hearts and their minds, their attitudes and their actions as well were wrong. They were wearing a mask and what you saw was not necessarily what they really were.

And Jesus said, even for my true followers, for my disciples, there is the danger that we could get into that as well. A picture of yeast is in bread making, obviously.

[8 : 31] It's the yeast that is used in the bread to raise it and the bacteria of the yeast go throughout the whole dough. Everything gets infected by it in the words of Jesus.

And Jesus says, if you're not very careful the kind of attitudes the Pharisees and others have, they could infect you and you could become like them, you could become hypocrites.

The real challenge for us, I think, is what I am on a Sunday in church. What I am when I go home or what I am when I go into work tomorrow or when I go to my sports club or to the other situations I have during the week.

Jesus says, I think, four things as we go down through the passage and I've used words that look quite similar to try and help us to remember them. Four key things that he says as he goes through.

And the first thing he says is there is something unforeseen that is going to happen. The Pharisees, the religious leaders, hypocrites down through the ages, they think, I'm okay, I can keep up my outward appearance, I can make everyone think that I'm good and I'm living a life for God and what I do behind the scenes, what I do in the privacy of my own home, nobody really knows about.

[9 : 57] And Jesus says, hypocrites will be exposed. The picture he uses here is of a typical Jewish house. So a typical Jewish house wouldn't be built with bricks and mortar the way ours are, be built with clay and it wouldn't in many senses be that secure on the outside.

It wouldn't be that difficult if someone was really determined to break in to get through that outer wall and to take something maybe even when the household was sleeping. So what they used to do was they would have a room right in the middle of the house.

A room with no external walls or windows. And that was the most private place in the house. It was where you'd keep your most valuable things. It's where they were safest.

And it's where if you wanted to have a really confidential conversation, you might go because no one outside the house could hear it. You are protected from everything. So Jesus says, it's a bit like going into that dark room.

That room with no windows waiting. Nothing can be seen or nothing can be heard. It's a bit like that. That you are trying to hide what you really are.

[11 : 09] And yet, what you have said in that dark room, it will be seen in the daylight and it will be proclaimed, he says, from the rooftops. Now exactly what or when the Lord Jesus means it will be proclaimed isn't entirely clear.

Sometimes hypocrisy is exposed in this world and the hypocrite is held up as someone who really hasn't been doing what they should have been. Perhaps sometimes we'll never be found out if there's hypocrisy but God knows and God sees and what we have done in the hidden place it will be seen in public.

Now that needn't necessarily just be something to challenge us. It's something also I think that can be an encouragement. Because I'm aware of many Christians, Christians in this church and one I'm not aware of, who the work they do for Jesus and the prayers that they bring before him and the encouragement that they give to others is unseen.

Most of us know nothing about it and yet we can be sure that God knows and that God will reward appropriately. The things that we have done in the hidden place, God will, Christ will give us, a credit will give us reward for in public because we have been faithful servants.

So there is a challenge here. There is also, I think, an encouragement for us. But a real warning against hypocrisy. So there is something, says Jesus, unforeseen that is going to happen.

[12 : 47] Jesus then says there is something that is unforgotten. And he is thinking now of the fact that he and his disciples are going to go through times of persecution.

And as the disciples are looking around, they may quite legitimately be afraid as they see the way things are going and the treatment that they are getting from the religious leaders.

And Jesus says it is natural to be afraid. It is human to be afraid. that actually you don't really need to fear what man might do to you.

What's really important is not the worst that men can do that you can imagine. What's really important is that you are right before God and that when you stand before him you can stand there with the assurance that your sins are forgiven and that you are not going to be condemned.

Men can kill the body, says the Lord Jesus. The one we should really fear, the one we should really respect is the one who ultimately is going to be the judge of our souls and who is going to judge us on what we have done with the Lord Jesus.

[14 : 04] Have we taken him as our saviour or have we rejected him? And again, along with the challenge there is an encouragement. Two examples the Lord Jesus gives which are illustrated in the pictures here.

the sparrow. The sparrow was a very basic foodstuff in Jesus' day. If you wanted cheap meat you could go along to the market and buy sparrow.

And the normal price for sparrow was two a penny. That's referred to elsewhere in the New Testament. Sparrows were sold for two a penny. But a bit like some of the offers that you get in supermarkets today if you decided to buy four sparrows they throw another one in for nothing. So you get two sparrows for a penny or you get four sparrows for tuppence. Not literally pennies in our terms and probably about an hour's wages would be equivalent to what we called a penny.

And that fifth sparrow you might think was utterly worthless. It's something that can just be thrown in as an extra that costs the vendor almost nothing and is almost just a kind of goodwill gesture to you. [15:12] But Jesus says God knows and God cares for that sparrow. When he says think about the hairs in your head can you count the hairs in your head? No of course you can't.

Even those of us who are losing the hair on our head we still can't begin to count how many hairs we've got. But yes says Jesus God has even your hairs numbered.

That's how much he cares about you. And don't think that if things get difficult in this world if it seems that the going is hard and you're struggling with it don't think in any sense that God has forgotten about you.

God cares about the sparrow cares even about the number of hairs on your head. How much more does he care for you if you are seeking to follow him and to live for him and because of that you get into a time of difficulty.

God loves you. You are of great value to him. And if you are trusting in him you can rely on him absolutely. It's really coming back to what Peter was saying isn't it in the children's talk.

[16:24] We can rely on God we know he won't forget us we know he won't abandon us even in the time of trial the time of difficulty he'll be there with us. And even if the worst happens and very unlikely in this country even if the worst happens and someone is martyred for their faith they can have the confidence that their soul is secure that they will get the reward from the one who truly judges and the only one whom we should really fear.

We are unforgotten. Third word is unforgiven and this is the most difficult and perhaps the most solemn part of our passage.

Look at half a dozen commentaries you get at least half a dozen different answers for exactly what it means. But this is something that a lot of Christians have found really difficult and a real struggle with.

Some of the older folks here will be aware of a book written by a man called Edwin Goss which is called Father and Son. It's actually still in print but I suspect not so much read by younger people these days.

Edwin Goss grew up as his mother died fairly early he was brought up by his father who was a brilliant academic a very devout Christian but very very strict with his children.

[17:49] And Goss's book is essentially about that with I think a little bit of exaggeration in places. One of the characters that Edwin Goss presents to us is a man called Mr.

Padgett. And Mr. Padgett is utterly convinced that he's committed the unforgivable sin. Now no one actually knows what sin it is he thinks he's committed.

He never tells anybody but he goes around saying I've committed the unforgivable sin. My soul is utterly damned. And sadly he's not alone.

There have been a lot of people who have felt I've committed the unforgivable sin. There's no way that God can forgive me for what I've done. Well can I say this this kind of God is not the God I know.

The God I know is best characterized in the parable of the prodigal son. This son who says effectively to his father I don't want you I want your money.

[18:48] He takes his money and he goes away and he wastes it on wild living and at the end when he's right down to his last penny or beyond that he decides he'll have to go back to his father expecting nothing.

Expecting at best that his father might take him in as a servant. What happens? As he's coming his father rushes out flings his arm around him and throws a huge party to welcome him back.

The father is not looking for reasons to condemn his son. He's looking for opportunities to show his love and his forgiveness to the one who's done him wrong.

That's my God. That's my father. That is the one I know and many others here know. Not someone who wants to condemn and to punish us for our sins but who wants us to accept the offer of salvation he has given us who sent his son to die on the cross for us so that everyone who trusts in him can be forgiven for the sins they have done.

And verses like this must be read in the context of that understanding. We mustn't look at them in isolation and worry about them. Quite often the comments of quite a few of them have read said if you're worried about having committed the unforgivable sin you haven't.

[20 : 16] Because if you had committed it you wouldn't be worried about it. So what is the Lord Jesus talking about? Well let's look at it a bit more in the context of the passage.

Because in verse 8 and verse 9 he's talking about people who own him acknowledge him or who disown him before others. Of those who are willing to stand up and say I belong to Jesus I know him I love him and of those if they do know him who would not want anyone else to know who would keep it a secret and would worry about other people finding out.

And Jesus says as he said earlier when he's talking about hypocrisy there is a reckoning in these things. Now it's not that if we are truly trusting in the Lord Jesus and we don't tell others about it that we lose our salvation through that.

The scripture is very clear that's not the case and you only have to look at Peter and the way he denied the Lord Jesus and got forgiveness to understand that. But Jesus said it is really important that you don't try to pretend that you don't belong to me if you really do.

And again I think that's going a bit beyond just not saying things to our friends or colleagues. We really should be witnessing about our love of the Lord Jesus and all he's done for us. But if we keep quiet don't say anything I don't think that is especially what the Lord Jesus is talking about here but it is more saying I don't know him and I don't want anything to do with him in the kind of way that Peter did.

[21 : 50] So Lord Jesus says in these kind of situations there is a reckoning it will be taken into account if we are truly believing in the Lord Jesus it doesn't mean we're not saved and don't belong to him though.

He then says verse 10 everyone who speaks a word against the son of man will be forgiven. Now the son of man is Jesus I think it's fairly clear from the way he talks about it through the gospels that he is talking about himself here.

He says even those who speak against me and who condemn me there is the possibility of forgiveness. Example of that the apostle Paul Saul of Tarsus Saul who was so instrumental in the stoning of Stephen and who was going around saying really terrible things about the Lord Jesus and about Christians and seeking to persecute them and Jesus meets him on the Damascus road and his life is turned round.

very clearly what Paul had been doing wasn't unforgivable. It was terrible that he was persecuting the Christians it wasn't unforgivable. Jesus says that can be forgiven.

But he says whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Now let's get to the number of it. What does that mean? Two things which I think I found reasonably persuasive in what I've looked at about this.

[23 : 13] In the other Gospels where the Lord Jesus says a similar kind of thing is in the context of people looking at him and looking at all he's done through the power of the Holy Spirit and saying that's the work of the devil.

That's not God's work that's the devil's work. And Jesus may be saying if someone gets to that kind of stage where they see goodness and they see God at work helping people healing them teaching them doing everything that is good and they say that's from the devil then they're never going to be able to change in their attitude.

So that's one possible interpretation. The other which I think I find probably the most persuasive is that the work of the Holy Spirit is to lead people to Jesus.

And when we hear God's word or when we read from the Bible it is the Holy Spirit who works in our hearts who convicts us that we are sinners that we need God's help and that we need to come to trust and to follow Jesus and who leads us to him.

And if the Holy Spirit again and again convicts us of this and seeks to bring our sins before us and we say no I'm not interested I don't need Jesus I'm not a sinner then there comes a point when we're no longer in this world when we said I don't need Jesus and we've rejected the work of the Holy Spirit seeking to lead us to him there is then no way of escape from that.

[24 : 49] If we persistently don't allow the Spirit to speak to us and to lead us to Christ then perhaps that is what the Lord Jesus calls blasphemy against the Spirit.

Now please don't take that away being the thing that you really remember of what I've said today. I think it's important that we try to understand these verses but there are other things which from a practical day-to-day viewpoint I think are much more important to us.

One more thing the last couple of verses of the chapter. And again Jesus is talking to his disciples and he's thinking about the fact there's going to be difficulties for them.

And he says you will be unforsaken. In other words when you come to the point of trial, when you're up before the Sanhedrin or the secular judges of this world and they're trying to condemn you because you're a Christian and because you're following me, you will not be on your own.

Don't worry that you're going to have to stand in front of these judges and you can't think what to say and you're terrified because the Holy Spirit will be with you. And the Holy Spirit will give you the words that you need.

[26 : 06] And that's the context of these verses. This verse is sometimes or has been used in the past as an excuse for lazy preachers not to prepare their sermons and to say well God will tell me what to say when I get there.

That is not what it's about. Nor is it an excuse for any of us not to read the Bible and try to understand and remember what it says. When we come to the point of difficulty, our understanding, our memory of scripture is absolutely vital.

Remember the Lord Jesus and his temptation again and again he repeated the words of scripture. So let's not get lazy and think I don't need to read the Bible because God will show me at each stage what I need to do.

But when we're in the heat of the moment, when everything is against us and in this case when the people were on trial, the disciples were on trial, Jesus says don't worry, don't fail you on your own because you will never be forsaken, my Holy Spirit will be there with you.

Those of us who were at the prayer meeting on Thursday, were thinking of some verses in John 15 which in many ways are a parallel to this. Jesus is talking to the disciples about the trials and the persecution that they'll face.

[27 : 18] And he says that when the advocate, that's the Holy Spirit comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me, and you also must testify for you have been with me from the beginning.

You must testify, we are God's mouthpieces in this earth, that is what we are here to do, to tell others about the Lord Jesus. But we're not doing it on our own, we're doing it through the power of the Holy Spirit and he ultimately is the one who gives us the words to say even when we feel weak and inadequate and perhaps when we feel under a great deal of pressure, we can trust in him because he is there to help us and to give us courage and to give us the right words.

So a difficult passion, undoubtedly a difficult passion, I haven't tried to cover in any detail all the difficult interpretations within it. But let's take away from it just one key thing.

and that key thing is that what really really matters is my relationship with God not what other people think about me.

We shouldn't be going around all the time looking over our shoulders and thinking well we need to look good before others, I need to avoid getting into trouble in this world, I need to keep an appearance up, keep the mask up if you like.

[28 : 54] What really matters says Jesus is how you are before God. You might appear totally insignificant and forgotten in this world, but God values you and God sees what you do and what is in your heart.

You may face times of trial and of persecution and of trouble in this world, but God is there with you and God will make sure that you are rewarded for your faithfulness to him.

Let's just make sure that we know God as our loving heavenly father, that we know him as the one who wants to have a living relationship with us and if we have sinned, if we have done things that we think are absolutely terrible, is still willing to forgive and to see us restored to him.

And if we're in that position, let's be bold and let's be willing to go and to talk to others about him and not to be ashamed of our Lord Jesus, but to present him before men and to recognize whatever happens, whatever the response is, he will be with us and will help us.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for these verses which are difficult to understand and yet which present to us great encouragement as well.

[30 : 16] we thank you that we are so valued by you, that you who value even the smallest sparrow, how much more you value and love and care for us.

Help us to rejoice in the love and the care you have for us. We thank you are the Father who wants to forgive us and to restore us to yourself.

We pray for any here who are far from you this morning, whether far from you, as have never come to know the Lord Jesus, perhaps far spiritually, having fallen away from love for him.

Help them to understand that you are the loving Father who will welcome them as they come through the Lord Jesus with their trust in him. Help those of us who know and who love the Lord to make that evident all around us that we won't be afraid of men, that we will recognise that our God is great, our God is with us, our God sees everything.

And help us to have lives of openness and honesty and not to fall into this trap of hypocrisy that the Pharisees had incited others into.

[31 : 25] Thank you for our time together. We commit ourselves to you. We want to pray again for those who have been affected by the bombing in Manchester and for your comfort and your strength for them.

We give you our thanks and commit ourselves to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.