

## Removing Hindrances to Discipleship (Luke 12:1-34)



Jesus was on His way to the cross and He was teaching His disciples how to remove four major hindrances in following Him. The huge multitude that had gathered around them to listen to Jesus nearly caused a stampede.

Christian faith was known as 'the WAY' in the early church. For 2000 years the Christian religion was understood as a journey, e.g. John Bunyan's 'The Pilgrim's Progress'. It started with Jesus and His teaching about the narrow road that leads to life. We are not here to stay but to make the heaven-ward journey. And Jesus warns us about the turns and twists along the long road, that can derail us. In particular, He points out the four danger signs to watch out for - hypocrisy, fear, greed, and worry.

### A. Hypocrisy (12:1-3)

1. Jesus warns, '*...first of all, be aware of the leaven of the Pharisees.*' This is the first thing we need to watch out for. In those days, each household made their bread daily, so this was an easy graphic illustration for them. Leaven, yeast, works as follows. (1) It takes only a little leaven to affect the whole dough; (2) It spreads slowly but once it's in, it works its way through; (3) It works invisibly, secretly, and silently, so that most are not aware of it working through their community. What is the effect of leaven on the dough? Leaven causes the dough to rise and inflate and makes it look bigger, but without actually increasing its substance.
2. Jesus calls this 'hypocrisy' (ὑπόκρισις). In Greek, it literally means to put on a mask for 'stage acting'. In those days, actors put on masks to play their roles. I was a child actor growing up, and I saw the stage set behind the TV cameras. I was shocked to find the beautiful buildings were made of cardboard and foam boards. They only had the 'front', a facade with nothing behind them. It was just 2D! Jesus warns His disciples it is easy to be the same spiritually, putting up a front with nothing behind it. This is the most common problem in religion.
3. In particular, Jesus warns of hypocrisy in our 'speech' - saying one thing in front of religious people, then saying something else in private. This is terribly 'short-sighted' because everything that is covered up will be completely uncovered on the judgment day. Everything we say in secret, inside the 'inner storage room with no window', will be broadcast in broad daylight and plain sight, from 'the rooftop open to the public view'. So, we need to think about what we say in public and in private: (1) Is what we say in front of people the same as what we say behind them? (2) Is what we say about God in the church including the songs we sing, the same as what we think of Him at home? Jesus warns us, "beware of hypocrisy" - the divergence in what we say and do in public and in private.

### B. Fear (12:4-8)

Jesus calls His disciples 'My friends' only here in the synoptic gospels. Now He is addressing the primary human fear, the fear of death. Fear is the greatest inhibitor in life. Fear paralyzes and cripples us from living fully as followers of Christ. "*The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe.*" (Prov. 29:25) We are often afraid of what people would think about us, say about us, and do to us. What is Jesus' answer to this fear of man?

1. First, think of the worst that man can do to us. The worst they can do is kill our bodies and take us out of this world. That is the absolute worst they can do and afterward, there is nothing more they can do. So the worst man can do is to make us go home to heaven to be with Jesus! And that's not such a bad thing.
2. Second, our 'little fears', i.e. the fear of man, are cured by having the 'much greater fear' - the fear of God. This is not a popular teaching, but there is a great need for healthy fear of God in Christian discipleship. (C.f. Is. 11:2 - the fear of the Lord is one of the manifestations of the Spirit.) The thought of offending God must cause us much greater fear than that of offending man. Why? Because God can kill our body and then throw us into hell!

Hell' here is 'Gehenna' in Hebrew, not 'sheol' or 'hades' which is the waiting place for the departed spirits. Gehenna or the 'Hinnom Valley' is the cursed place where Jewish children were sacrificed to Molech in the OT times (Lev 18:21; 1 King 11:7; Jer 7:31ff; 19:6 etc). In the NT days, this place was used as a rubbish tip where there was a perpetually smouldering fire burning up the rubbish. 'Dung Gate' faced this valley, and Judas died

here. Jesus likened hell to Gehenna. This is the lake of fire, the place of 'eternal torment and punishment' for the souls who could not be 'salvaged and recycled'. They are thrown out *here* forever.

Jesus repeats, "Yes, I tell you, fear Him!" If the fear of offending man paralyzes us, then we have lost sight of the fear of God.

3. *Third, to get rid of wrong fears we must know God's love and commitment to us.* Jesus gives two examples, one from the birds of the air, and another from the flowers of the field: (1) One copper coin bought two sparrows in those days. Two copper coins bought five - the fifth one is thrown in for free. God who knows and cares for even this fifth sparrow, knows and cares intensely for you. (2) God knows and cares about every minute detail of your life. He numbers the very hair on your head. On average, blond heads have around ~145,000; dark heads around ~120,000; and redheads around ~90,000. So be confident. Don't fear man. Instead, fear God!
4. Now Jesus talks about three related issues to do with freedom from the fear of man.
  - I. The importance of publicly acknowledging Jesus before men. Jesus states, 'if you don't acknowledge before men that you belong to Me, then I will not acknowledge you before the angels of God. But if you acknowledge that you belong to Me, then I will acknowledge you before the angels of God.' Whose acknowledgment do we need more? Man or God? Your active acknowledgment of Jesus activates the angels on your behalf. They are 'ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation.' (Heb 1:14) Whose help do you want more? Man or angel?
  - II. The importance of not sinning against the Holy Spirit. If you say anything against Jesus it can be forgiven, but not against the Holy Spirit. Why? The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity who convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and Judgment. If the Holy Spirit withdraws Himself from someone, then there is no one to convict him of sin and bring him to repentance. The Jews reviled and crucified Jesus, but fifty days later three thousand of them found forgiveness because the Holy Spirit convicted them and they turned to Christ for salvation.
  - III. The importance of developing relationship with the Holy Spirit in times of trouble and persecution. Jesus tells the apostles that the persecution will arise from their own people, the Jewish synagogues, then it will spread to the civil authorities. This is exactly how it panned out for the followers of Christ in the early church, after the pattern of Jesus' own persecution. But Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will not only be our comfort and strength during such times, but the Holy Spirit will also put His words on our mouth. Not only to 'make a legal defence', but also to make us His witnesses. Wycliff, Huss, and others had the right words to speak before men during the days of persecution. Hugh Latimer's (1487-1555) said to Nicholas Ridley, two of the three Oxford Martyrs, as they were burned at the stake, "Play the man, Master Ridley. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England, I trust, shall never be put out."

### C. Greed (12:13-21)

1. Inheritance is often a divisive issue in the family, and rabbis often gave decisions on the disputed points of the Law. But Jesus refused to get involved in the domestic dispute over the family inheritance when a man asked Him to use His authority to help him get his 'fair share'. Jesus would not be diverted or distracted from his calling. But He addresses the *attitude of greed* that gives rise to such disputes. The division of property would not have solved the basic problem of the heart. Jesus says to the man in effect, 'Get a lawyer if you need one. But I am more concerned for you than for your inheritance.'
2. Then Jesus warns the disciples, 'Take heed and beware of covetousness.' Covetousness is translated sometimes as 'every kind of greed'. 'Beware' (φυλάσσω) here is a strong word. It suggests taking an action to ward off a foe, or having 'military guard and vigilance', or a shepherd keeping an eye on the flock against wolves. "For one's life does not consist in the abundance of things he possesses." We often measure success by how much wealth we accumulate. People ask, how much is he worth? But Jesus taught that worldly riches can be the greatest handicap in Christian discipleship. A man's worth is not measured by what he has, but by what he is on the inside.
3. The rich man in this parable was a successful businessman, a farmer with a big harvest. He planned to pull down his barns and build bigger ones because he needed a lot more storage space to store all his wealth! Afterward, he intended to relax and enjoy all the comforts and pleasures of life his money could buy.

Jesus calls this attitude to life 'greed'. What did greed do to this rich man's soul?

(1) Greed bound his soul to this world. Crops, barns, and rebuilding bigger barns, etc. Today's equivalent may be bigger houses, better cars, more properties, and shares, etc. There is no thought on the deeper issues of life, or of serving God and helping people, etc. This rich man was poor towards God.

(2) Greed made him think only of himself. 'I, my, mine' fill his self-talk. In Greek, 'my' occurs 4 times, and 'I' occurs 8 times. His sole interest was in himself. His was a life at its most base level – that of ingrained selfishness and self-indulgence.

(3) Greed deluded him to think he will be around forever to enjoy his riches. He was blind to the impermanence of life, and he assumed the future was in his control. Many people plan as if they will live forever in this world or they will enjoy their retirement forever. But life is not certain, death is.

4. God said to the rich man, 'Fool! [literally, utterly senseless one] This night your soul is required of you.' He would leave everything behind that very night. All his money and wealth would be worth exactly 'zero' to him that very night!

Jesus poses a very important question here. He contrasts 'laying up treasures for oneself' to 'being rich toward God'. How healthy is our 'bank balance' toward God? How much of our life is invested in heaven? Or are we in danger of finishing up with 'zero' transfer of balance from this life into eternity?

#### D. Worry (12:22-34)

1. If greed hinders those who have much, then worry can hinder those who don't have much. Greed can never get enough, and worry is afraid it may not have enough. Jesus teaches His disciples to trust God with every detail of their life, and not to be attached to the things of this life. *'Do not worry about your life... Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing... Your Father knows that you need these things.'*

2. Jesus asks two rhetorical questions to show us the irrationality of worrying :

(1) What does worry achieve? Anything good? Can we add one cubit (i.e. 45cm, the length from elbow to fingertips) to our height by stressing about it? Or can we lengthen our lifespan by worrying about it? Note that 'stature' (12:45) can mean either 'height' (Lk 19:3) or 'age' (Jn 9:21). So why worry?

(2) Can you imagine a father who feeds his pet dogs and birds and animals the best food, but starve his own children? Of course not! Jesus points to the ravens, which are unclean birds (Lev 11:15). God who feeds even these unclean birds, knows your needs and He will take care of you, His children. It doesn't mean we shouldn't manage our finances or be lazy or irresponsible. But it does mean we need to learn to trust our heavenly Father for every detail of our life and learn to rest and be content in Him.

Christian discipleship includes godly contentment and inner peace in the realm of personal finance. Christians living this way become tremendous witness to the covetous, stress-filled society we live in today. Someone whose life was under much pressure, said to a friend as he went to sleep happily, "I leave the worrying to God. There is no sense in both of us staying awake." This man knew *'He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.'* (Ps 121:4)

3. What is Jesus' antidote to worry? Just as wrong fears are cured by the right fear, wrong worries are cured by the right concern. *'Seek the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you.'* (12:31) If we make God kingdom our number one concern and priority, we need not worry about our life. When we meet God's needs, God meets our needs. God is more than willing to give us the kingdom so we can serve Him fearlessly and live in generosity. *"Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."* (12:32)

The secret is, the more we draw from our heaven's account from the kingdom resources for God's purposes, the more we lay up our treasure in heaven! It means when we take heaven's resources channelled through our lives to do the kingdom work, this is 'credited' into our account in heaven. This is how we provide ourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys (12:22). It is the best deal in life!

4. Lastly, Jesus said where we lay up your treasure, our hearts follow. A little boy who gave one penny to a missionary, later wanted to attend this missionary's meeting. His parents asked him why. He said, 'I gave him

my penny. I want to know what he has done with it.' The boy is absolutely right. Where we give, our hearts follow.

When the four major hindrances to Christian discipleship - hypocrisy, fear, greed, and worry – are present in our lives, it is a danger sign that we are thinking too much about this world and things of this world, and not enough about God and His kingdom and eternity.