

Afraid And a Friend of God

Introduction

The Text

¹In 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.

⁴“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. (Luke 12:1–7)

A Surprising Unity

- A. I’m going to organize my thoughts this morning under just two headings: (1) Afraid of God (vv. 1-5); and (2) A Friend of God (vv. 6-7).
- B. It seems to me Jesus is bringing these two ideas together into a surprising unity. The Christian, the disciple, is to be both afraid of God, in one sense, and a friend of God, in yet another sense. The two are not at odds with each other but intriguingly complementary. Indeed, together they keep us balanced, sane, right in a world gone wrong.

- 1. I trust you shall see more of what I mean as we proceed.

(1) Afraid of God (vv. 1-5)

The Conflict in the Context

- A. As we move to vv. 1-5, then, we must remember the context—really, what we dealt with in greater detail last week. Remember that from Luke 11:14 on, Jesus has been engaged in conflict with some of the religious leaders in Israel.
- B. In vv. 37-52 in particular, He was confronting what I called last week the idea of “duplicity”, or dis-integration of body and soul. In our text this morning He calls it “hypocrisy” (v. 1). It’s this unfortunate reality where we can present on the outside something that is not true of us on the inside. There are two of me. Here’s what I want you to see, and here’s what I really am.
 - 1. These Pharisees and lawyers among the Jews were using religion to put up a good front. They looked like the holiest of men, and, because of this, people in Israel were looking to them for counsel and care. But truly their hearts were far from God and set on their own

glory and gain. They were not counseling or caring for God's people, they were consuming them.

- C. When Jesus, in love for His people, confronts this duplicity He makes an enemy of them, and He knows that they are now lying in wait to catch and kill Him (vv. 53-54).
- D. Now, you remember, perhaps, the words of Jesus to His disciples in John 15:18, 20a: “¹⁸ If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. . . .^{20a} Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”
 - 1. Well, this is the sort of thing that Jesus is now concerned with in our text. He knows that His conflict with the cultural leaders there in Israel will throw His disciples into conflict with them as well. Those who oppose Him, those who persecute Him, those who want to kill Him, will want to do the same to those who follow Him.

Speaking to Us First

- A. And so He turns in these moments to address His disciples in particular and prepare them for such a struggle. Look at v. 1a there with me: “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”
- B. Now stop for a moment. Let us pause and consider the privileged place we enjoy as disciples of Jesus. The crowds, the masses, they may hear something now and again of His word and wisdom, they may get a glimpse here and there of His miracle and power, but the disciple is taken in closer, the disciple is spoken to “first”.

A Warning for Disciples

- A. But now what does He say to His disciples here in particular? Look at vv. 1b-3: “^{1b} 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.”
 - 1. So Jesus begins by saying: “Look out for these duplicitous, hypocritical men. They will try to take you down with them.” Jesus transitions from rebuking the Pharisees and the lawyers to now warning His disciples.

- B. Let me bring out a couple of observations at this point:

Observation #1: Sin Is Like Leaven

- A. First, notice that Jesus puts an image on this religious hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He likens it to “leaven” (v. 1). That is important for us to get ahold of. A little leaven added to dough will slowly, over time, cause it to ferment and rise. The picture of leaven, then, is of something small, so small it often goes unnoticed, but, if left unchecked, it slowly permeates and corrupts the whole.

- B. We must understand that this is often how men and woman fall. It begins small, seemingly harmless. Rarely does Satan move an a person with the full catalog of evil. Often it is disguised under the good. And little by little, compromise by compromise, before you know it, you are in the thick of a wickedness you could not have even imagined before.
 - 1. And you wonder: “How did I end up here?!” Well, the answer is often: Leaven. Little by little. Unchecked, unnoticed, unrepented. And on it spread through the whole!
- C. I wonder if you have something of this leaven in your life even now? Something you know God has said beware of but you are not so sure you are ready to take Him seriously on and let it go.
 - 1. Be warned. This leaven will not sit still while you play around with it. It cannot be tamed and made your pet. It is not a neutral thing that you can control and manipulate and rid yourself of when you are good and ready. It is always active, always pressing, always moving, even now, to permeate and corrupt, not just this little part of you, but all of you. Put it out!

Observation #2: Hypocrisy Is Hopeless

- A. The second thing to bring out is that this hypocrisy is hopeless. It doesn’t pay off in the end. We may be able to fool our fellow man for a little while but we have never fooled God, and in the last day judgment, even our fellow man shall finally see all we truly are. God will pull back the curtain. God will let out what we have hidden within.
 - 1. Pursuing empty religion in this way is a fool’s errand. It’s cosmetics on a corpse. Eventually it starts to stink. Eventually God will see to it that the truth comes out.
- B. If we’re honest, Jesus’ language here is frightening. And He’s not just talking about the religious leaders and their issues. He’s talking about the disciples, about us. He moves it to the second person: “you”. Look again at v. 3: [“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.](#)
 - 1. Think of what you have said in the dark, think of what you have whispered in private rooms, and now think of those things being made public knowledge. What if right now on this screen we put up audio/video not of the latest announcement or ministry event or mission trip, but of everything that’s ever taken place in the secret chambers of your heart. And everyone’s just listening and watching.
 - a. It’s enough to humble you to the ground, is it not? And that’s the point. He’s trying to get us, as I’ve said so often here lately, to stop it with the show, quit playing the religious game, and be honest. Let what’s inside come out into the light. Confess, repent, let the mess out. You need help. You may be fooling us. But you’re not fooling Him.
- C. One thing to make clear on this point: He is not saying that Christians are perfect inside and out. He is saying that His disciples are to be honest, no longer concerned with projecting something untrue of themselves.

1. Indeed, open admission of sin and struggle and weakness, in the end, serves, not to detract from Christ's glory, but to add to it as He is seen more and more to be the merciful Savior He truly is. We end up with Paul on this: "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor 12:9). "I am a sinner in need of grace, I am weak in need of help, and Jesus is sufficient. If He can be this for a wretch like me, I have no doubt He can be this for you."

Learning to Fear

- A. Now, as we progress in our text, Jesus' discussion rightly turns towards this idea of "fear". Five times in the next four verses He speaks of it directly. He has set us up well for this transition I think.
 1. For, in the first case, we now come to realize that to stand with Jesus is to have all these men standing against us. By following Him we make enemies of them. Fear is the natural response to such a shift in circumstance. No doubt the disciples would be starting at this point to feel afraid.
 2. But, secondly, and more importantly, Jesus has already been hinting towards the foolishness of fearing such opponents, for they themselves shall have God to answer to and He will uncover the truth about them in the end.
 - a. So vv. 1-3, then, have readied the disciples to discuss now not only the subject of fear in general, but the proper object of our fear in particular: namely, God!
- B. Look at vv. 4-5: " ⁴ I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ["Can the Pharisees and their crew harm you? Yes they can. They may even at last succeed getting their hands around your neck and killing you. But do not fear them."] 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!"
 1. In other words, you think these men are scary? Wait until you see my Father on the day of judgment. All these men can do is kill the body. But God can throw body and soul into hell (cf. Rev 20:15).
- C. The word Jesus uses, translated "hell" there in our text, in the Greek is "geenna", derived from the Hebrew, meaning the "valley of Hinnom".
 1. The valley of Hinnom was a valley adjacent to Jerusalem where in earlier days children had been offered in sacrifice to the false god Molech (Lev. 18:21; 1 Kgs 11:7, etc.).
 2. King Josiah put an end to this (2 Kgs 23:10), and the valley was thereafter regarded as accursed (Jer. 7:31ff.; 19:6).
 3. In Jesus' day, the place was used as a rubbish heap, where garbage and criminals were discarded and burned. It is said that, likewise, fire was always burning there.
 4. One commentator writes: "The term [geenna] could not have a more grisly or more dishonorable association" (BECNT).

- a. And Jesus picks this image up and says: “Something like that is what a holy God will do to rebellious sinners on the day of judgment—only He does it not just to the body but to the soul, and not just for a moment but for all eternity.”

- D. Now, step back, and remember what Jesus is trying to do here. He’s trying to encourage, to embolden, to prepare His disciples for the rising opposition and coming conflict. And we are tempted are we not, at this point in His heartwarming little pep talk to say: “Jesus, You missed the mark! I know you were shooting for encouragement, but that’s not happening here.”
 - 1. I mean think about it. If you’re afraid. If people are out to kill you and I’m trying to find a way to comfort you. I’m just not going to play this card, right? “Calm down, it’s going to be okay. There’s something far worse to be afraid of than these bloodthirsty dudes. God can kill you and throw you into hell.” “O gee, thanks.” You’re never coming back to me for counsel ever again.
 - a. But He’s Jesus, right? He doesn’t miss the mark. So what is He after here?

- E. Well, He’s actually tapping into one of the richest traditions in OT. It’s this idea of the fear of the Lord.
 - 1. Perhaps the most famous example of this is found in the book of Proverbs: [“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, \[. . .and it continues . . .\] and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” \(Prov 9:10\)](#).
 - a. The point here is this: You cannot even begin to see anything rightly until you see God as He is and yourself in light of Him. We are always so prone to exalt ourselves, our circumstances, this present moment to something more important, to something ultimate. We think that this is the big deal. And Jesus is saying, “Slow that down. Okay, so these guys may not like you. What’s the worse they’re going to do? Kill you?”

- F. I remember, when I was in college, Francis Chan, came in to speak at one of the Campus Crusade meetings or something. And he brought out this rope. It was so long it literally ran through the whole auditorium. And at the very front end of the rope, he had wrapped it with red tape. Just a few inches or so. And he drew our attention to that few inches of red on the seemingly mile-long rope, and he looked at us and said:
 - 1. “Here’s your life on this earth. The Bible says it’s like ‘grass’—here one day and then just gone the next (Ps 103:15). The Bible calls it a ‘vapor’. It appears for a little time and then it just vanishes (James 4:14). And now the rest of this rope is your life hereafter in eternity. Now, you tell me. What’s more important, what should call for your focus and attention and concern more—this little bit here, or all of this that spreads out from it?! Because what you do with these few inches of red will affect, influence, determine how all the rest of this goes, when you stand before God in judgment and you are either in Christ or you are not.”

- G. That’s in some ways what Jesus is trying to get us to think about here. Who cares if they kill you if you are right with God and will live with Him forever. But, on the other hand, who cares if they love

and adore you, if you die in your sin and will be cast into hell for eternity. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Prov 9:10).

(2) A Friend of God (vv. 6-7)

Great and Good

- A. But now the fear of the Lord is a much richer idea than just being afraid of God, being scared into submission. That is not the fullest sense of the term. And Jesus will not let us think it is. That is why He moves seamlessly, without so much as a stutter, from this idea of being afraid of God to the idea of being a friend of God.
 - 1. He goes from perhaps some of the most terrifying verses in all the Bible (vv. 4-5), to some of the most comforting (vv. 6-7).
- B. If you were reading or listening carefully, perhaps you already were anticipating such a transition. He hinted at this idea even back at the beginning of v. 4: “I tell you, my friends . . .” Even as He’s calling His disciples to be afraid of God, He does it within the context of friendship.
- C. But what He hinted at back at the beginning of v. 4, He is about to make abundantly plain in vv. 6-7.
 - 1. We have just seen that God is great and sovereign and holy and just. Now Jesus wants us to see that God is also good and gracious and compassionate and tender—that He takes all of His terrifying might and marshals it in love and concern for His children.
 - 2. We have just seen that we are nothing, just grass, a vapor, and He is almighty. But now we come to the stunning reality that, though we are nothing in and of ourselves before Him, we are so precious, so valuable to Him.

Follicles and Sparrows

- A. Look at vv. 6-7: “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.”
 - 1. Jesus tries to get this point through to us, as He often does, by reasoning from the lesser to the greater. He provides us with two examples of such reasoning here. He’s starts talking about follicles and sparrows.
- B. Consider first the idea there in v. 7 that God numbers the hairs of your head. Now some of the dudes in the room are saying: “God’s got it easy with me. That number has been in decline for years and I only have a few strands left, hanging on for dear life.” I joke, but this is truly one of the most precious statements in the Bible.
 - 1. Now I should say, in our culture we tend to make a big deal out of hair. We spend a lot of money on it—get the right cut, the right product, the right color, or whatever. So we might miss what Jesus is trying to get at here.

- a. The point He's making is that God knows the most insignificant stuff about you. However important you think your hair is, it's not. It's always falling out. It's collecting in your brush, it's gathering in the shower drain. We run the Roomba in my house from time to time and, living with three girls, it is amazing how much hair that thing picks up. And, now hear me: God knows about every last strand. That's the point.
 - i. If He's numbered every last hair, don't you think He's going to be concerned for the big stuff in your life?
- C. But now let's consider what He says about the sparrows. “[N]ot one of them is forgotten before God” (v. 6b).
- 1. It was interesting. I've been reading through Genesis and this past week I came to the story of Noah and the flood. And, after God had flooded the earth and Noah, his family, and the animals were all still in the ark, Gen 8:1 says this: “But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark.” He remembered the animals.
- D. And Jesus is saying here that He cares even for the least of these animals: the little sparrow. Five of them sold for two pennies. Think about that for a moment.
- 1. Let me ask you, if you're out walking and you see a penny on the ground, do you pick it up? There was a time when I was a kid when no question I'd be all over that. You could actually buy something with it, a gumball or whatever. Now, can I just confess, sometimes I see nickels, dimes, and even quarters and I don't stoop down to pick it up. I'm thinking is it really worth the effort? What will it really get me? What do you even do with coins anyways? Who carries coins? And think of all the germs on that thing. It's not worth it.
 - a. And God is saying: “I stoop to pick it up. I see it. I care about it. It's worth it to Me.” These are the most common, most inexpensive birds, two pennies, and Jesus is saying: “My Father values them.”
 - i. And then He moves from the lesser to the greater at the end of v. 7: “Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.” In other words, if God values them, remembers them, how much more you?

The Cross

- A. So what we come to understand then is that the fear of God is not contrary to friendship with God, nor is being a friend of God contrary to being afraid of Him. In the Bible, the two come together in a surprising unity.
- 1. And really it is only Christianity that can keep such seemingly opposite realities together, which is what we should expect, I suppose. Because only Christianity has the cross.
- B. Indeed, it is at the cross of Christ more than anywhere else that these two ideas can be seen in profound merger.

1. There we see the truth that there is no one more holy, more ferocious, more wrathful, more exacting, more just than God. There can be no escape from Him. You may get away with much trickery, thievery, secret sinning among men, but you will get nothing by God. He sees, He knows, and you deserve the fully fury of His anger for it.
 2. But, and this is the most glorious point of all, God has thrown His Son in the way of His anger. We talked about the valley of Hinnom, and the fire. It was the place where Israel burnt their sons as an offering to Molech. Well, God threw His own Son to the flames for us. He took the judgment, He took the curse on the cross.
 - a. The cross not only calls us to fear God it shows us the way back to friendship with Him, it displays His mercy and grace and lovingkindness, His willingness and desire to move towards and care for us, sinners though we be.
- C. A man who spends time abiding by the cross will find that both fear and friendship are kept in a balance in his heart. What I mean is this:
1. On the one hand, he will not come away thinking that God is just a big teddy bear in the sky, you can squeeze when you are feeling lonely and He makes you feel better, He's just a softy really and obedience, a life of holiness, well, come on, He's gracious. No! You see the exacting nature of His judgment, so wrathful is He against sin that when it is put upon His Son, even a Father's love cannot hold it back. So he will come away with God's friendship but also with a healthy fear of Him as well.
 2. But, on the other hand, He will not come away feeling like God is too holy for Him, too pure, too angry, closed off, for He sees that Jesus has died in His place! He will come away both afraid of God and a friend!
 - a. Only the cross can keep us in the balance. Only the cross can simultaneously humble us to the dirt and lift us to the heavenlies.
- D. The idea at the end of all this, then, is that fearing God should lead to a fearless life. Knowing Him as friend should mean you no longer tremble before your enemies. What can they do, what can they say? God—the holy, just, overturning, vindicating God—is watching over you with Fatherly, friendly concern.
1. That is astounding, and it really means you ought not to merely walk out of these doors this morning, you can skip out of here like little kids without a care. God is with you and for you in Christ. Amen.