

Keep your lamp burning: fear God and not man
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Do you want to be ready? Your boss barges into your office early in the morning with a new and important project. She tells you there is great potential for the company and for you. She wants to know if you're up for it; if you have the ability to take on the extra responsibility. Are you ready? Your coach needs an extra spark from the bench; the team is playing poorly and is getting behind. There's no life on the court. He wants you to provide that spark. Are you ready? Tragedy has struck the FBC family; your friend has just lost her husband, the father of her children, and her best friend. More than ever she's going to need her sisters in Christ. Are you ready?

Life can be pretty unpredictable. Wise people understand this and develop a mindset and a lifestyle that's ready to deal with the unexpected. Being ready for the unpredictable requires a kind of preparation that not everyone has or is willing to give. It requires sacrifice when no sacrifice seems to be required; it takes foresight and wisdom that those obsessed about what's happening today aren't willing to have. And you need some boldness, too; when Noah was getting himself ready I'm sure everyone around him thought he was nuts.

Our spiritual lives are quite similar. There are unpredictable life events that will challenge and threaten your faith. If you're unprepared, if you're flat footed, you might just cave to the pressure. Jesus wants you to be ready for the demands of following him. At the end of the last section we studied in Luke 11, Jesus highlights the people's opposition to the ways and things of God. The religious leaders didn't like what Jesus was saying so we're told that they were lying in wait to catch Jesus and trap him. And the schemer is up to his same tactics today looking to trap Jesus' followers. Only those ready for the coming challenges and demands of faith will be found faithful; will you be ready?

Today we begin a new section in Luke 12. Put one finger on Luke 12:1 and then flip the page and put another finger on Luke 13:9. All the verses in between your fingers are a section of Jesus' teaching that's focused on helping us be ready for the opposition that we will face when we follow Jesus. Because here's something we need to know: God doesn't accept excuses for compromising or caving in with when the demands on our faith increase. Do you know what I mean? Now, that's not to say that God doesn't have grace for us when we struggle and fail during a test. But what it does mean is that Jesus expects us to up our game so we remain faithful during the test. It's just like a boss with a big project; she will find someone who can do the project if you're not up for it. It's like a coach looking for that spark; if you can't provide it, he will find someone who can. It's nothing personal; it's just reality.

Faith is like this, too. When the demands on life and faith increase, Jesus doesn't accept excuses. In fact, the trials and tests are designed by Jesus so we know what our faith really

looks like. And when we fail the test (and we all will at some point - I do, too) God invites us back with grace, but insists that we make the necessary changes to our faith in him.

All of the sermons in this series, from this section, I'm calling, *Keep your lamps burning*. Those are Jesus' words from 12:35. It was his way of telling his disciples to be ready. Jesus is coming soon. The opposition is increasing and you can't give in - *Keep your lamps burning* during the night. So, let's start this section and theme by reading the first 7 verses of Luke 12 (READ).

Our passage starts with a warning, but ends with encouragement. So, let's look at both of those. Jesus actually has a couple of warnings. The first warning is right away at the end of vs. 1 and into vs. 2. "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." Leaven is one of the Bible's favorite illustrations of sin and here's why: sin has a way of working its way in and through a person and a community very much like leaven or yeast works its way in a lump of dough. In antiquity, the most common way of leavening dough wasn't sprinkling yeast, but instead it was taking a lump of dough that was leavened, pull off a tiny little portion and then add that tiny little portion into a new batch. When you'd mix the tiny portion of leaven dough with the new batch it works its way throughout the new lump. And they would repeat this cycle over and over again anytime they would prepare new dough.

That's how sin works in our lives. When you let a little sin in, it works its way through your entire life or community. That's why the Bible warns us so much about not letting even a hint of impurity or immorality into our lives. As soon as we do, it's only going to grow more and more.

The particular sin Jesus is warning against at first is hypocrisy. The idea here is play-acting. Playing a part or pretending. That's actually where that word comes from; it's a reference to the actors who play different parts in a play. When it comes to spiritual things, when it comes to our relationship with God, play-acting and pretending is deeply problematic for God and here's why: it's dishonest. When you watch a movie, a TV show, a play at the HS, you know the kids acting are playing a part. That's part of the fun; you get to watch them pretend and take on the life, the emotions, the actions of a new character. But when it comes to life and faith, the exact opposite is true. We want to see truth and authenticity. We're looking for consistency and congruence. "Does Jeff really believe what he says? Will Rebecca really put her faith into action?"

Now, why is Jesus talking about this in light of anticipated opposition or trials? Well, here's how it works: Standing and living for the light in a dark world isn't easy; there are going to be pressures and temptations. And you get this, right? If you're going to be unwavering on how Jesus defines sexual purity, you are going to be strange and odd in this world, right? If you choose to bring a Christian work ethic into your place of employment, God's definition of family into your neighborhood, God's money management to your finances you are going to be strange. Or, how about this: if you are going to parent your teenagers according to the ways of

Jesus, limiting and working against the negative effects of social media, not letting your kids have free reign on the internet, dare I say it, not giving your kids a phone at age 6 (or 16), you (and your kids) will be out of step in this world.

So, what's a temptation? Pretending. Play-acting. Let's just pretend we're parenting the values and truths of Christ. Let's play-act at work and in the neighborhood. Let's put this mask on here and then let's put that mask on there. That's the hypocrisy and Jesus is warning us against it, isn't he? Look what he says in vs. 2-3 (READ).

This temptation to hypocrisy, though, is born from a deeper problem and it's the second warning from Jesus I mentioned earlier. That problem is the fear of man. Look at vs. 4; "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more they can do." Why pretend? Why play-act? Because we're afraid. We're afraid of what people will do if they know the truth about what we say we believe. We're afraid we'll be excluded; we're afraid we might be mocked. In this case, Jesus is saying you might lose your life. So even then, when your life's on the line, Jesus is telling you to weather the test. Stay strong. Don't buckle. Don't be a coward. Don't be afraid of people.

One of the things you'll notice in this entire section (and we see it right away in the first passage) is the absolute necessity for you and me to look at all of these issues (the troubles, the temptations, the rewards) in light of eternity. Don't worry about the person who can kill you because after they do that, they can't harm you anymore. Wait, what!? Isn't that everything? Isn't that the worst thing that can happen? Isn't dying the worst? Well, being killed is the worst thing that can happen to you only if there's no eternal life. If there's nothing beyond. If this life is all there is then, yes, being killed is the worst. But that's not all there is, right? There's something beyond and what's beyond is way more important.

So, here's something you need to understand right now about being ready in your faith, about standing strong in Jesus during times of opposition and trials: you have to have the eyes of faith that look beyond this life and this existence into the eternal one. If you don't live for the life to come, if you don't cherish and treasure the coming promises of God that begin after you die, then you'll never be ready. You won't keep your lamp burning. And let me tell you why: Living for God and living for myself and for this world are completely at odds with one another. You can't do both at the same time. You can't live for God and live for yourself and this world. By definition, living for Christ means you sacrifice and give up everything worldly and earthly. Your flesh, your body, craves and desires the things of this natural world. And God says, "To follow me you must give that all up." So, FBC, what do you have eyes for? What do see and consider as the most important reality to live for and to pursue? This life or the one to come? How you answer that question will determine if you are ready or not; whether you keep your lamp burning or not.

Those are the two warnings: don't pretend and, more importantly, don't fear man (which is another way of saying, "don't value or prize what others can give you more than God."). But

there's encouragement, too, that if you believe it will help you stay ready. We see that in vs. 5-7 (READ).

There's such an interesting little twist in these verses. It starts by saying, "You might be afraid of some people. Don't be; be afraid of God." And then it ends with encouragement not to be afraid at all. How do we put these things together?

A helpful place to start is remembering that fear and desire go together. Every desire you have has a corresponding fear. If you desire the approval of man, you're afraid of man. If you desire to hang onto life with everything you've got, you'll be afraid of sickness, death, or poverty. Clearly, the first "do not fear" is related to fearing man; don't fear people who can hurt you in this life, but not in the next one. So, don't desire the pleasures, promises, and treasures of this earth. Instead, fear the one who can take away the pleasures, promises, and treasures of heaven. That's God. Fear God.

And then here's the twist: this God whom you should fear, this God whom you should desire above all things cares for you. Jesus says, "Look how insignificant sparrows are in the scheme of life! You can buy one for 2 pennies. Yet, not one of these little sparrows is forgotten by God. Look at you; the very hairs on your head are numbered. Look how much care God has for you; look how interested and involved God is in your very life. That's the big conclusion in vs. 7: Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Make a list of all the things that you're afraid of losing when the opposition comes to you because of your faith. Reputation. Income. Friendships. Security. Acceptance. Livelihood. Here's what Jesus is saying: God's got it and he's got you. Look how precious you are to God. He will take care of you. He'll give you what you need.

Now, there's something we all need to admit: there are some things that we desire that just are not good for us and God won't (and even shouldn't) give to us. You might desire a lot of likes on facebook or a lot of twitter followers, but if it's just about your ego don't plan on God providing that to you. Sure, you might be afraid of losing that, but you live for an audience of One. We only are trying to please the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are many more temptations to follow that we need to be read for. But this is the first: the temptation to pretend at our faith because we're afraid of what we might lose when others oppose us for our faith. But remember to care most about God; he will take care of you. He loves you and as you seek him and desire him he will give you everything you need.

Questions for the week

- What kind of opposition have you experienced or you could imagine experiencing for your faith that you need to be ready for?
- What kinds of things you should think and do to have your faith ready for tests?

- How does knowing God's care for you help your temptation towards hypocrisy?