

Keep your lamps burning: don't fall away

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We're talking about being ready (*Keep your lamps burning!*) If you're going to walk the path of Jesus you will experience trouble, hardship, and even persecution of some stripe. The promise of God and his salvation is not that we would be given an easy life free from pain and sacrifice; no, the promise we've been given is that when we are united to God through Jesus' forgiveness of our sins, we receive strength, joy, peace, and hope even though life is filled with hardships and trouble. That's why Jesus is going to say in 2 chapters, "Hey, you have to count the cost when you follow me. Don't sign up if you're not ready."

I'm wondering if any of you got on the Jesus train without counting the cost. If you're sitting there thinking, "Brian, what do you mean *count the cost*? Nobody ever told me to do that that" I'm sorry. We've tried to make that clear in our presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Following Jesus requires sacrifice. When you say "yes" to Jesus you say "no" to yourself and to this world. Jesus really focuses on the cost of following him chapter 9. In vs. 24, for example, Jesus says something like, "If you try to keep and save your earthly life you will lose it, but if you lose your life right now for me, you will find a more perfect and pure life." Later starting in vs. 57 he outlines the cost. You have to be ready to give up your comfort, give up your earthly obligations, even being ready to sacrifice family connections to follow Jesus. Being a part of the family of God requires sacrifice.

Our focus in this series we're calling *Keep your lamps burning!* is about getting ready. It's about identifying potential temptations we will have when we start feeling the pressure and opposition when we follow Jesus. The first temptation we talked about last week is hypocrisy. When the pressure mounts and others disapprove of our faith and message, we might be tempted to pretend, to play-act. To act one way in church and another way at school. To pretend we have faith while we are together (because we like being together), but then wear another mask when we are at work or in the community while being watched by others. This comes, of course, from a fear of man; wanting the approval and applause and acceptance from others.

But there's another temptation we might have when the fear of man grips our hearts and it's downright apostasy. Apostasy is abandoning or renouncing faith. It's walking away; it's saying, "this is not for me."

In 249 AD a man named Decius became the new Emperor of Rome. Rome had fallen on hard times and Decius was committed to restoring her glory. Decius saw a direct connection between Rome's troubles and the empire's abandonment of Roman worship. So, he began a religious campaign to encourage, even force, Romans to practice their ancient pagan religions. Of course, Christians posed a big problem for Decius; Christians wouldn't worship the Roman gods and they were also converting people to Christianity. Well, that was about to change.

Decius enacted new laws that required everyone in the empire worship the Roman gods. They were required to come to the temple square, bow to carved images, and pledge allegiance to the gods of Rome. When you did, you would get a certificate by the government proving that you were compliant to the Emperors commands. To live and prosper in Rome you needed that certificate.

Followers of Jesus confess that Jesus alone is Lord and God. To worship the Roman gods was to sin against Jesus. What do you think happened? Some Christians remained faithful, refusing to pledge allegiance to the Roman gods and they suffered the consequences. Some fled the empire. Some forged certificates; they committed fraud. They weren't going to bow, but they needed that certificate to keep their livelihood and to be in the governments good graces. And some downright recanted their faith; they disavowed Jesus and worshiped the idols. What do you think you would have done? Years later when Constantine was Emperor he made Christianity the state religion and eliminated any kind of persecution; when that happened some former Christians wanted to come back to the faith. They were called *the lapsed* - people whose faith lapsed, who fell away, in the face of persecution. So, the church had another dilemma: do we accept the lapsed back into the church or not? What do you think?

Don't think apostasy, walking away from Jesus, during difficult times is outside the realm of possibility for you. Let's read what Jesus says to help us get ready (READ Luke 12:8-12).

This passage has three sections. Again, it starts with a warning and ends with encouragement, just like last week - so let's take them in successive order. The opening two verses reveal a truism with God. Two throne rooms, if you will, are envisioned. The earthly throne room is where the kings of the earth reside; they hate the things of God just like Psalms 2 says (Psalm 2:2), "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed." And these rebellious kings, these rebellious governing officials who possess the power of the sword, who can throw you into jail, who can possess your property, want to know where you stand. Will you acknowledge Jesus or will you deny him? Will you say in the face of their threats, "Jesus is Lord" or "Caesar is Lord?" And what Jesus is saying in these first two verses is what you do before men will have a direct correlation to what will happen in the heavenly throne room where the angels of heaven are standing guard making sure only those in Christ have access. And if you affirm and acknowledge Jesus on earth, Jesus will acknowledge you before these angelic tribunal. But if you deny Jesus on earth, Jesus himself will deny you in heaven.

I'm reminded of the simple statement from Romans 10:9, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Is that it? Just say, "Jesus is Lord?" Just say those words? Just let those words come out of your mouth and believe that Jesus raised from the dead and you will be saved? That's pretty easy! No. It's not that simple. Try this: You stand before a Roman official who simply says to you "Caesar is Lord" and then he waits for you to respond. You're supposed to say the same thing back; it's your way of declaring your allegiance, your loyalty to Rome and to your Emperor.

It's the way to stay in Caesar's good graces. But it's not true; Jesus is Lord. But to say Jesus is Lord puts your life in immediate jeopardy. If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord you will be saved... will you?

To do that, to acknowledge Christ before men even under threats, requires preparation. Have you ever witnessed something dramatic, even perilous, and kind of sat there stunned and not really know what to do while others hopped into action and were real-life heroes before your eyes? And then, after everything is over, you take stock of what happened and you ask yourself, "How come I just sat there? How come I didn't do anything? And how come those people did?" Most likely, the answer to that question is rather simple: they were prepared. They were ready. They either had thought through what they would do if that ever happened or they witnessed it before, sat there themselves, and then thought, "Next time, I'm not going to just sit there." Either way, they got ready.

Briefly, how do you get ready? Two things pop into my head. First of all, people who are ready think it through. They use their mind and say, "When this happens to me, this is what I want to do." Like we talked about earlier, they count the cost; they think through the sacrifices. Do you know what else they do? They practice their faith today in the little things? Do you think you will die for Jesus if you won't give up porn for Jesus? Do you think you will be willing to go to jail for Jesus if you won't fast from time to time? Do you think you will stand up to kings and magistrates and judges when you can't even tell your friends at school that, "Yes, I believe in Jesus *and because I do* I won't go to that party or have sex or smoke pot." You will not be found faithful in these once in a lifetime moments and if you are not faithful in the daily moments. So, get ready.

Let's get back to the text. In vs. 10 Jesus has these words that basically say, "If you speak against the Son of Man (that's Jesus) you'll be forgiven, but if you speak against the Holy Spirit, you won't be forgiven." What is Jesus saying here and why is he saying it? Something that helps me think through this is taking a broader understanding of the idea of *speaking* in a similar way we just talk about *confessing*. "If I just speak certain words then this is going to happen?" No, it's not merely about the words, it's about the heart and life behind the words. So if you speak and are against Jesus, you can be forgiven. That shouldn't be too surprising. We all start that way; all of us are against Jesus to begin. We're sinners. Jesus came to save sinners, praise God!

But why would God forgive someone who's against Jesus, but not someone against the Holy Spirit? It's not so much that God is playing favorites or is just being picky, but it has to do with the power and work of the Spirit of God. It's the Holy Spirit who makes the message and work of Jesus Christ effectual in our lives; it's the Holy Spirit who ushers the presence of Jesus into our hearts; it's the Holy Spirit who shows us our need for Jesus and the glory of Christ for us. So, if you're against the Holy Spirit you're against the work of God for you. When you're against the Holy Spirit you're against the only power that can save you and forgive you.

And I think that's why Jesus brings this up right now; to stand for Jesus and to be ready when the opposition comes, we need the Holy Spirit. That's what he gets at in vs. 11-12 (READ). Jesus gives us really important insight on what being ready looks like in these two verses. I would bet there are some of you out there who think that being ready means you've got to have every last detail figured out. You've got to know this detail and then you've got to know what detail. But do you know what? That's impossible! You can't figure out every single detail. So here's what happens: you get all stressed out. You're freaking out that you don't have this figured out or that. And then you start doubting and questioning your faith; "I'm not prepared like Jesus told me to."

But Jesus is letting us in on something really important: being ready doesn't mean you'll have everything figured out. The situation he brings up is the throne room again; standing before kings, mayors, county boards wondering if you'll give allegiance to Caesar when you're allegiance is always and only for Jesus. What should you say? No really; what *exactly* should you say? I don't know and neither do you. How do you prepare for that exactly? You can't. But do you know what you can do? You can do two things.

Like we've been talking about: you can prepare your mind and your heart for the moment. You can tell yourself, "Brian, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal finds you; don't be shocked when the sacrifices to follow Jesus keep going up, up, up. Jesus said that would happen. I'm going to believe that his promises are better for me." Like I said: we've talked about that already so let's move on to the second thing you can do.

You can believe that Jesus will give you the words that you need in the moment. That's what Jesus said in vs. 11-12, right? The Holy spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. When I hear that I think of several things.

First of all: this is why you don't want to blaspheme or speak against the Holy Spirit. You're going to need him. He's going to be the source of your very life and boldness! He is the one who is going to give you the words that you need in that moment to honor Jesus; he's the one who is going to make you fruitful. Don't ask me how. I don't know how. It's a miracle of his grace and favor; it's a gift of his mercy. That's how; that's not something I can explain. But I don't need to explain it; you don't need to explain it. You need to know it's true and believe it.

Secondly, what a relief! What comfort, what peace to know that in my hour of need God will supply the words that I need to give him the glory and praise in the face of opposition. Instead of recanting under stress, you will give testimony. This exactly what happened with Peter in Acts 4. The authorities were more than annoyed; they warned once already, now they were going to put the smack down. But instead of Peter shrinking, he stands. Why? Well, he was prepared; he kept his lamp burning. But also, listen to vs. 8, the moments he starts giving testimony to Jesus. It says, "Then Peter, *filled with the Holy Spirit*, said to them...." Here's what I want you to notice: Jesus is keeping his promises. He promised his disciples that in that hour the Holy Spirit would would teach them what to say. And it happened just like Jesus promised.

Lastly, isn't God good? Don't we have a merciful God? Isn't God so very good to us? He's forgiven our sins so we won't stand before him guilty. He's brought us into his family and united us to him and to all who are in Christ. And he's warning us, he's preparing us, to be ready for the pressure, opposition, and anxiety that we will face as followers of him. And - here's what we're talking about today - the Holy Spirit will give you what you need so you can testify about Jesus maybe with your very last breath. From start to finish, Jesus has prepared for you. He's a good God.

Key Vs. Luke 12:11-12

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Questions for the week

- Are you concerned at all of not acknowledging Jesus before others? Why or why not?
- What are some things you need to change to be ready to stand up for your faith?
- What helped or encouraged you the most from God's word this morning? Share it with someone.