

Luke 12:1-12

Jesus is not very nice

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We're in the middle of a sermon series about how Jesus is not very Christian. Which is of course a bit like saying that a square is not very four sided. Of course Jesus is Christian. Being Christian is about following Jesus. But the popular understanding of what it means to be Christian is sometimes far from Jesus' behaviour. Last week Jesus was being particularly rude to the Pharisees and experts in the Law. We don't think of rudeness as being a Christian trait. But in that case it was warranted because those Pharisees and experts in the Law were cutting other people off from God. Jesus needed to warn against them in the strongest terms. A bit like you might warn a child about drugs in the strongest terms, without being particularly concerned about whether you were being rude to drug dealers in the process.

Today's passage has Jesus continuing to warn against the Pharisees. This time you couldn't say he was being rude. Because the Pharisees aren't there to be rude to. But he's talking about them behind their backs. And he's doing it in most unflattering terms. That's not very nice, is it? So the title of the sermon today is, "Jesus is not very nice."

So what does Jesus say about the Pharisees. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy." There's an interesting word there - yeast. Why not say,

"Be on your guard against the bad character of the Pharisees"?

Why call it yeast?

Yeast is something you put a small amount in,
and it changes the nature of the whole loaf of bread.

The hypocrisy of the Pharisees had a way of seeping into everyone else
and making the whole society go off.

A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be one thing
but actually they are something quite different.

The Pharisees pretended to be pure and holy,
but as Jesus told them in last week's passage,
they were actually full of greed and wickedness.

And their hypocrisy had a corrupting influence
on everyone around them.

We've seen it in our own day.

When the people
who make a big fuss about being the ones who love God,
turn out to be wicked,
then that puts everyone else off from trying to love God.

Here is Jesus' warning against hypocrisy
and his promise to those who love God quietly and unobtrusively.

"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."

In other words, there are no secrets.

You've heard of Mossack Fonseca?

There are no secrets.

You might employ a secretive law firm to cover your financial dealings.
It will be leaked on the internet.

You've heard of wikileaks?

The KGB and CIA's most closely guarded secrets.

Available for anyone to read on the internet.

There is nothing concealed that will not be uploaded to the internet.

What you have whispered in the ear will be uploaded to utube.

And if that's true today because of the internet.
How much more is it true before they eyes of our God,
for whom nothing is invisible,
nothing is hidden?

What does that mean for those of us who follow Jesus?
It means that every action we take,
we should be happy to read about it in the newspaper the next day.
And if that doesn't make you slightly uncomfortable,
then you aren't being honest with yourself.

You might be able to keep things secret from people -
though in the internet age, I don't like your chances,
but nothing can be kept secret from God.

Now when people are being nice,
they make sure there's more carrot than stick
in their encouragement of others.
You want to tell your kids more about the benefits of good behaviour
than the consequences of bad behaviour.
It would feel draconian to have it around the other way.

But Jesus is not very nice.
He leads off with the warning.
And it's a grim warning.

"I tell you my friends,
do not be afraid of those who can kill the body
and after that can do no more.
But I will show you who you should fear:
Fear him who, after your body has been killed,
has authority to throw you into hell.
Yes, I tell you, fear him."
Very often when we read about fearing God in the Bible,
we are able to say that it's about respect and not shaking in your boots.
I don't think we can honestly say that this time.

When the contrast is something more scary
than having your body killed,
I think you are meant to shake in your boots.
When the threat is to throw you into hell,
I think you are meant to shake in your boots.

Can you really still say that in this day and age?
I think we are not being faithful to Jesus if we don't.
It's not our job to censor Jesus,
to present the sanitised 21st century Jesus.
You don't have to change what someone says to misquote them.
If you just selectively quote,
you can get across a very slanted picture.
If we know out some of what Jesus said,
we are misquoting him.
Jesus said what he said for a reason.
His wisdom is greater than ours.
We don't want to focus unduly on one thing he said,
but neither can we afford to ignore it.

So what about those who Jesus says do have something to fear?
There are plenty of people who don't publicly acknowledge Jesus.
Is it really helpful to tell them
to fear God because he has authority to throw them into hell?
Normally we would shy away from such threats.
They sound manipulative.
We would like to convince people to serve God without the threats.
Then their response will be more genuine and heartfelt.
We would shy away from it.
But Jesus doesn't.
Why is Jesus happy to threaten people with hell?

The reason is because it's true.
God's justice demands that those who don't respond to the Lord Jesus
will be thrown into hell.
So to tell people about it,

Is just to let them know how the world operates.
There's nothing malicious about making people aware of a great danger
- particularly a great danger that threatens their future directly
and when it is one that they are unaware of.
Indeed it would be callous
to let people continue on their merry way without warning them
when so a great a danger threatens them.

But as well as a clear warning about our danger,
Jesus also has a reassurance for us.
"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?
Yet not one of them is forgotten by God.
Indeed the very hairs on your head are all numbered.
Don't be afraid;
you are worth more than many sparrows."
If God knows the ins and outs of the tiny sparrows,
and he is aware of the declining number of hairs on my head,
surely I can trust him to look after me!
Well absolutely.
But how does this square with what he has just said?
Jesus has just told his disciples to fear God,
and now he says 'don't be afraid?'
Well he's harking back to 'those who can kill the body
and after that can do no more.'
Jesus says don't fear them.

Who are they?
They are those who would kill Christians just because they follow Jesus.
They are those who would bring you
before synagogues, rulers and authorities in verse 11.
Don't fear them.
Jesus gives us three reasons not to fear them.
First reason.
In verse 4, they can't do anymore to you than hurt your body.
Anything that someone does to your body only lasts for this life.
In the scheme of things, that's not very long.

Second reason.

In verse 8.

the flip side of not fearing those who oppose Christians,
is acknowledging Jesus before others.

And Jesus makes the promise

that if you acknowledge him before others,

then he will acknowledge you before the angels of God.

Do people know that you are a Christian?

Work colleagues, people who do your favourite recreation with you,
neighbours in your street?

If they do, that's great,

because you have a promise

that Jesus will acknowledge you before the angels of God.

The third reason not to fear opposition is in verses 11-12.

Jesus tells us that when we are hauled before the authorities,
the Holy Spirit will give us the words to say.

We don't need to worry about defending ourselves.

I wouldn't take it that means

the Holy Spirit will give us words that will avoid us getting into trouble.

Rather I think the Holy Spirit will give us words to say

that will enable us to avoid denying Jesus under pressure.

Our chief concern is not with being teflon coated in this life.

It's that we don't succumb to pressure to deny the Lord Jesus.

All of us are only human,

with all of the weaknesses and frailties that entails.

We know that placed under enough pressure we would crack.

But the promise of Jesus is that the Holy Spirit will strengthen us -
give us the words to say.

You might remember a couple of years back,

the Arab Spring was in full cry

and the Muslim Brotherhood was making life very dangerous
for Christians in Egypt.

And there are a large number of Christians in Egypt.

The Coptic Orthodox church is an ancient church,

and the Coptic Christians make up 10-15% of the Egyptian population.

And you might remember the images of Christians in orange jump suits being beheaded on the beaches.

And the Egyptian Christians were asked,

"How can we pray for you at this time?"

And their answer was not to pray for relief from persecution, but to pray that they might hold firm to the Lord Jesus amidst it.

Their strength at that time came from the Holy Spirit.

Well it might seem far removed from our situation here in Australia.

Not a nice thing to have to think about.

But Jesus is not always into niceness.

And the promises that a Christian makes to follow him when they are baptised

are the same in Australia or Egypt or Laos or Iran.

And there's no reason to think Australia couldn't become like one of those places.

We are a long way from that at the moment.

But even in the last decade, the trajectory has been in that direction.

But don't worry.

Jesus has promised to acknowledge us before the angels of God.

Wherever Australia goes, nothing can change the situation in heaven.

Well if you've got your Bible open,

and you are still following the passage,

then you'll notice that I've saved the least nice verse until last.

Jesus is not very nice,

and this verse has proved a struggle for many on that score.

We're in verse 10.

"Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven."

It's not very nice to think that there are things we could do wrong for which there is no forgiveness, no redemption.

Isn't Christianity meant to be about grace?

So what is this unforgiveable sin,

the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?

The first thing to say
is that anyone who is concerned about committing the unforgiveable sin
has not committed it.

The person who has blasphemed against the Holy Spirit
has a heart that is so hardened against God,
that they are not at all concerned about offending God.
So if you are worried that you might blaspheme the Holy Spirit,
don't worry,
the fact that you are worried is proof enough that you won't.

One way to contrast speaking a word against the Son of Man
and blasphemy against the Spirit,
is to contrast the experience of Paul and Judas.
Did the apostle Paul speak a word against Jesus?
Yes he did. Absolutely.
Before he was known as Paul,
he was Saul,
the man who persecuted the church.
And at that stage of his life, he certainly spoke against Jesus.
But he did it from a position of ignorance.
He didn't have the witness of the Spirit in his heart,
leading him to know that Jesus was God on earth,
come to live amongst us.
He thought he was protecting God's people
from a dangerous false teaching.
But God revealed the truth to Paul.
He came to repentance and found forgiveness.
He spoke against the Son of Man and was forgiven.
Judas on the other hand is a different story.
He betrayed Jesus to the religious leaders.
But he didn't do so out of ignorance.
He had spent three years with Jesus.
He had the witness of the Holy Spirit in his heart,
he knew what he was doing.
And he did it anyway.

He was close enough to Jesus to know who he was,
and yet he chose not to respond to the love of God.
And Judas did not find forgiveness.
Was that because God said,
"You've gone too far this time.
What you have done is just unforgiveable.
Betraying my Son is a bridge too far"?
No. The problem is in the heart of Judas.
Having had the truth about Jesus revealed to him by the Spirit,
and having blasphemed the work of the Spirit by rejecting that truth,
Judas would never turn and ask for forgiveness.
His heart was too hardened to ever ask.
And so in despair he took his own life.

There's plenty in this passage that's not particularly nice.
But for the faithful follower of Jesus,
there is clear encouragement mixed in with the stern warnings.
So let me leave you with the encouragement.
"There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed,
or hidden that will not be made known."
And that means that your quiet and secret acts of faithfulness
will also one day be broadcast from the rooftops.
And if you are shy about that, don't worry.
On that day you will want everyone to know,
there will be nothing to be shy about,
because your heart will be simply rejoicing
that your life brought glory to Jesus.
And everyone knowing that will bring him more glory.
And that's good.
"You are worth more than many sparrows."
In the midst of whatever the world throws at us,
we can rest secure in the knowledge,
that God knows our situation,
and he values us very highly.
"The Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."
Even when you are painfully aware of your human frailty,

when it comes to giving account before those in authority,
God will give us the words to say.
Under pressure you will have access to reserves of strength
that are not your own.
You will be able to remain true to your Lord.