

12:1 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, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."

Massive crowds were coming to hear Jesus. The word translated as "many thousands" is "myriads" (μυριάς *urias*). A myriad is 10,000, so this could mean that tens of thousands of people had gathered, but it is more likely hyperbole used to say it was a huge crowd. The crowd was crushing; people were trampling one another.

Many preachers would be thrilled over growing numbers, but Jesus responded with realism. Popularity and curiosity will not change the condition of the heart.

In chapter 11 Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and lawyers for their hypocrisy; in chapter 12 He turns to instruct the disciples.

The word hypocrite (ὑποκριτής *hypokrites*) in Greek was originally used of actors who hid behind a theatrical mask when performing. The mask portrayed someone other than the real person behind it. The term was then applied figuratively to people who pretended to be someone they were not. Religious hypocrisy can take the form of criticizing the behavior of others while doing what is condemned (Matt. 7:1-5), or it can be putting on the face of piety to be honored by others (Matt. 6:2-6, 16-18). The Pharisees were hypocritical in both ways.

Hypocrisy is one of Jesus' main concerns because, like leaven in bread, it permeates everything. In the historical context, the pervasive influence of the Pharisees is in view; however, religious hypocrisy is part of the nature of fallen humanity; it is present in every belief system, religious or secular. The disciples are exhorted to constant vigilance lest they become religious hypocrites.

12:2 "But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known"

12:3 "Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms will be proclaimed upon the housetops."

Hypocrisy only works if it can remain hidden. But since nothing escapes God's notice, living in hypocrisy will end in disaster. The day will come when God will unmask hypocrisy; in time everything will be revealed (1 Cor. 4:5; Romans 2:16; Heb. 4:13) and judged. This is why God must be feared above all else (12:5).

Not only actions, but speech will also be evaluated (Matt. 12:36). Whatever is said in the dark shall be heard in the light. What is whispered in the inner rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops. Private practices, private thoughts, and things done in private places will all be brought out into the open.

12:4 "I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do.

We should fear God, not men, for although men can kill the body they cannot kill the soul.

Losing one's life is the extreme cause of fear; therefore, we should not fear lesser evils either. Jesus isn't threatening, He is offering a loving warning. He calls them friends in verse 4, and then in verses 6 and 7 He calls them to trust in God's care.

12:5 "But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!"

Verse 5 expands upon verse 4. The reason to fear God above men is because He has the authority to cast people into hell.

The word for "hell" that is used here is Gehenna. "It is named after a location in the valley of the sons of Hinnom, a ravine southwest of Jerusalem that served as a trash heap where material and dead criminals were discarded and burned (it is called "Tophet" in 2 Ki. 23:10 and Jer. 19:10-13). It is also the place that the wicked kings had used earlier in Israel's history for the worship of Baal-Molech, which included offering children in a flaming sacrifice (Jer. 7:31-32). The term could not have been more grisly or have a more dishonorable association. It is better to fear the Judge than those with no real authority. God stands in contrast to people, who can do nothing. In fact, God will judge a person after death. Several NT texts warn of responding now, lest one meet judgment from God and be cast into fire, and many OT texts picture God's judgment as fire" (Bock, 1136, the parenthesis are added).

Modern people want to deny that hell exists. They say that Jesus is simply talking about the grave and there is no eternal punishment. But that makes nonsense out of the context. Men can put someone in the grave. Why would it be more important to fear God if all He was going to do was the same thing that men could do?

To fear God means to revere Him or to stand in awe of Him, but it also carries the idea of awe and fear of punishment. Both ideas fit here. Men should revere God, which would cause them to regard Him above others; they should also fear punishment because God will uncover what is hidden and judge the hypocrite.

One cannot help but be impressed at how Jesus modeled His advice. He was not fooled by the crowds whose opinions of Jesus would be controlled by the religious leaders who hated Him. He did not fear those who would kill Him, nor did He try to gain their approval, but He remained faithful to God to the very end.

12:6 "Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God.

12:7 "Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows."

In verse 6 Jesus turns to the Father's care over His creation to remind the disciples that He will care for them even if death is part of discipleship.

God even cares for things that humans do not highly value. At that time, five sparrows were sold for a few cents; they were the cheapest things sold in the market, and may have been part of the diet of the poor (Danker, 245). Despite the cheapness of these insignificant birds, not one of them escapes God's attention.

But God's concern for His creatures is especially applicable to His people. God is aware of the smallest details of our life; He even knows the number of hairs on one's head. Therefore, no one needs to worry. We will never be disappointed by trusting God; He will never forget or abandon us.

As Isaiah 49:15-16 says, "Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands." Although this verse is not making any reference to the cross, there is a very real sense in which the nail prints in the Savior's hands also bear our name upon them: He died for us. Let there be universal joy for the love of God is stronger than the most tender affection of a mother to her child.

12:8 "And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God;

12:9 but he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.

Verses 8 and 9 reinforce Luke 9:23-26, but they shed light on the seriousness of Peter's denial in Luke 22:34, 57, 61, and contrast to Stephen in Acts 7:55-56. The real concern is that a disciple expresses his commitment to Jesus in front of other people. The one who confesses the Son of Man in this life will likewise receive acknowledgment by the Son of Man before the angels at the judgment. This reinforces the importance of fearing God, not men.

12:10 "And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him.

Verse 10 expands upon the theme of judgment and the need to make a definitive decision for Christ. Those who fear men more than God will be cast into hell (12:5); denial of Christ will result in being rejected by Christ (12:8, 9), and whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

Jesus' comment is remarkable since the forgiveness of God is so broad we normally think that nothing is beyond its reach. Yet there is an act that will never be forgiven.

Blasphemy is extreme slander and is the same as speaking against God.

Blasphemy in the Bible involves either (1) giving the attributes of God to a creature (Lk. 5:21; Matt. 26:65; Jn. 10:36) or (2) in attributing some evil to God or denying some good which should be attributed to Him. The latter is the blasphemy that is spoken of here; the Jews attributed the work of God to Satan.

In order to understand what Jesus meant by the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, the context in which He spoke needs to be considered.

Jesus had just cast a demon out of a deaf mute. With the demon gone, the man could hear and speak freely. Immediately, the source of Jesus' power was questioned.

In Luke 11:20 Jesus said, "If I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

Both the healing and casting out of the demon were undeniable displays of the power of God at work in Christ. They were evidence that the kingdom of God had been inaugurated in the person of Christ. To deny them would take real effort. One would have to willfully and self-consciously suppress the truth, reject the work of God, and come up with another explanation for it even though there was no other explanation. This is what the Pharisees did.

The Pharisees had taken their stand against Christ. They could not deny that a miracle had happened so instead they attributed the miracle to the power of Satan. They were in essence accusing Jesus, the Beloved Son of God, of being in league with Satan and calling God's power satanic.

This was logically absurd as Jesus pointed out. If Jesus were destroying Satan's allies (demons) with Satan's power, Satan's kingdom would come to a quick end, for a kingdom or household divided amongst itself cannot stand (Matt. 12:25). The Pharisee's explanation was simply a weak attempt to purposely and willfully remain in a state of unbelief. This conscious, willful rejection of the works of God in Christ is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

In Matthew 12:31-32 Jesus said, ". . . any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."

Why can blasphemy be forgiven but not blasphemy of the Holy Spirit?

Blasphemy of the Spirit takes blasphemy to a new level. It is the conscious, willful unbelief that is even willing to attribute indisputable acts of God to Satan. This distinction is seen in the distinction that Jesus makes between the speaking against the Son of Man and speaking against the Holy Spirit. The former action is forgivable, the latter is not. It seems that speaking against Jesus is the rejection of Jesus' messianic claims, while the latter is rejecting Him with full awareness that the Holy Spirit is working through Him. If this understanding of the passage is correct, the distinction between blasphemy against the Son of Man and that of the Holy Spirit is only incidental, for rejection of the Son of Man with ample understanding of who He is, is also rejecting the Holy Spirit who reveals Him.

Hoekema lists five clarifications of this sin:

1. This is not the same as doubt – it is a deliberate rejection of God's revelation in Christ.

2. This presupposes a revelation of the grace of God, a working of the Holy Spirit and some illumination of the mind about the truths of salvation.
3. The sinner has reached a point of no return where no matter what more is given, it will not cause him to repent.
4. The one who fears that he has committed this sin probably hasn't, since fear is incompatible with the state of mind of the one who has sinned in this way.

(Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 185-186)

In conclusion, one could say that the person who blasphemes the Holy Spirit is someone who has been exposed to and rejects indisputable evidence presented by the Holy Spirit in revealing who Jesus is and willfully continues in that state of unbelief until they die. The Baptist theologian, John Gill, in his commentary on Matthew 12:32 wrote, "it shall not be forgiven him: not because the Holy Ghost is greater than Christ; or for want of efficacy in the blood of Christ; or because God cannot pardon it; but because such persons willfully, maliciously, and obstinately oppose the Spirit of God, without whom there can be no application of pardon made; and remain in hardness of heart, are given up to a reprobate mind, and die in impenitence and unbelief, and so there is no forgiveness for them." In other words, a defining characteristic of someone who has committed this sin is that they will *never* repent of it. God allows them to continue in their unbelief. If someone truly repents after rejecting the work of the Spirit, he has never blasphemed the Holy Spirit in the first place. Thus, one can say with confidence that those whom God has chosen for salvation cannot blaspheme the Holy Spirit for God will preserve all whom He saves to the end.

Lastly, it should be made clear that people are not excused from the consequences of their sin simply because they are *not* one of the elect. No one in hell will say, "I'm here because God didn't choose me." Instead they will regret how they "suppressed the truth in unrighteousness" and refused the light that had been given to them (Romans 1:18-20). Furthermore, God cannot be accused of evil for allowing someone to follow the desires of his own heart.

12:11 "When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say;

12:12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

This section ends with an example of when someone may be tempted to fear men more than God or to deny Christ. It also adds the assurance that in the midst of persecution the Holy Spirit is with God's people. God provides the Holy Spirit to help believers in whatever circumstance they may find themselves.

A similar command is given in Luke 21:12-15, and these two passages find their fulfillment in the arrest and trial scenes in Acts. When Peter was arrested by the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:8 he was "filled with the Holy Spirit," and according to Acts 4:14, "they had nothing to say in reply." Later in Acts 6:10 when Stephen spoke, "they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking."

IN SUM:

Luke 12:1–12 speaks about the disciple in a hostile world. The disciple has a tough road to travel. Jesus warns against the pressure to conform to surrounding attitudes, and thus become a hypocrite in one's religious activity. Pressure comes from raw secular power that causes one to fear people, not God. Vibrant eschatology is the answer here. The disciple should realize that people can kill the body, but God is the one who decides one's eternal fate. Jesus says to fear the one with control of life after physical death. But God is not only Judge, He is also the one who is aware of and cares for His creatures, especially humans. One can stand in the face of persecution because God is there. All of this should comfort and reassure the disciple.

A far greater warning also emerges. One can speak on occasion against the Son of Man and be forgiven, but the decision to deny Him publicly and reject Him obstinately is the sin that cannot be forgiven. The one who permanently denies the Son is judged. To blaspheme the Spirit is to deny decisively the testimony He offers about the Son.

In contrast, there are benefits to confession and trust. The one who confesses the Son of Man will be received by Him before the angels. The one who relies on God in the midst of persecution will be given words by the Spirit to answer accusers. The entire unit calls the believer to trust the caring Father and not give in to human pressure, since it is He who has authority that counts, and it is He who supplies what is needed to endure. The disciples' commitment to stand with Jesus reflects the depth of trust in the Father, both as Judge and Provider. In other words, if one is to survive the ultimate heat of judgment, one must trust God. God enables one to withstand the heat of the world's kitchen. A decision for Jesus will produce a reaction. The disciple must be ready. A decision to defer to the pressure that people exert may lead one to deny permanently the Son of Man and the Spirit that testifies of Him, but a decision for the Son of Man will lead him to embrace the faithful one before God. If one understands who controls the soul and gives blessing to it, one will know who to draw near to in faith. As with many passages in Luke, the choice belongs to the reader (Bock, 1144–1145).