



Session Eleven

The Gospel of Luke, Pt.8

Luke 12-13

All of Luke 12 and the first verses of 13 find Jesus warning his disciples and the crowds following him that judgment is coming. They provide a very different—but very necessary—view of Jesus and what it means to follow him (or not); necessary in the sense that for all the blessings of calling on Jesus as the Christ there are significant, sometimes dire, consequences for not doing so, or for doing so with anything less than whole-hearted commitment.

Questions to consider as you read Luke 12-13

1) The first pericope in Luke 12 (verses 1-12) encourage us to consider which is the lesser of two fears. Often, because we much prefer popularity and avoidance of conflict over rejection and criticism, we make life choices from fear of even mild persecution. We avoid really living the strength of our convictions, putting us in the hypocritical position of not practicing what we preach. Jesus wants us to consider, though, that however great the discomfort of persecution, it's nothing compared to that of judgment.

- a) Read 12:4-5. What is Jesus' point here?
- b) Verses 8-10 are among the most debated in all Scripture. What do you think Jesus means that "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven?"
- c) Jesus is making the case that there is no room for hypocrisy or role-playing in the Christian life. To what extent can you say that you live in complete honesty and transparency?

2) The so-called Parable of the Rich Fool gives us the opportunity to look critically at how we understand what God gives us and what we do with it. More to the point, it urges us to think about where we place our security: material wealth or God. Peter Rhea Jones, in writing about this parable, describes the rich fool's approach to life as "practical atheism": he professes faith in God but lives as if there is no God. Think about your life, how you live in general and your relationship with material wealth in particular, and ask yourself two questions:

- a) To what extent does the way I live suggest I'm a practical atheist?

b) What message about following Jesus does this send to people who know us but don't know the Lord?

3) 12:22-34 resonates with things Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. Note the words "do not worry" in verse 22. The Greek is a present imperative which means that not worrying should be a constant, ongoing posture for each of us. But this is not an excuse to do nothing. Jesus is clear that God will meet all our needs, but note the condition (verse 31): *seek the Kingdom*. God never said, "God helps those who help themselves." God did say, "God helps those who help the Kingdom." Mindful of that, and having read 12:22-34, consider these questions:

- a) What does the way you use your resources say about your values and priorities?
- b) Scripture makes it clear that we're to live in such a way that people and needs have priority over possessions and ownership—do you?
- c) Most of us live anxious lives, yet the case can be made that there is no greater denial of that kind of life than devotion to providing for the needs of others. Would you be willing to devote much or all of your life to providing for others if it would free you of anxiety?
- d) If you think focusing on others would *increase* your anxiety because it would leave you with less time to meet your own needs, do you not believe Jesus that in focusing on the Kingdom all your needs will be met?
- e) Are you willing to lower your own lifestyle to advance the Kingdom?

4) Many find 12:35-48 troubling or, frankly, annoying because of Jesus' use of master/slave terminology and the suggestion that the realities of responsibility and reward we encounter in daily life seem to apply equally to our life with God. But, for so many of us, this really is the issue, isn't it? Jesus asks more of us than we're willing to give: we don't want to be a slave to anyone and we don't want to be held accountable for falling short in our discipleship (we rely heavily on grace: "Well, OK, I didn't really do what Jesus wants me to do but he'll forgive me, so it doesn't really matter"). But Jesus is clear: to be his follower is to be his servant, and we'll be judged and rewarded according to how faithfully we discharge the responsibilities we have. So, a question: how do you think Jesus would judge your work as his follower? Would he give you more responsibilities or take away the ones you have?

5) The implications of 12:49-53 are among the harshest in Scripture. Inevitably, we look to Jesus for peace and comfort. And he is, indeed, the "Prince of Peace." We also long for reconciliation and healing, and those are part-and-parcel of the Kingdom. But, in these verses, Jesus does not mince words: the Kingdom, and all the blessings it promises, are not without cost. With redemption comes division; making things right means confronting what's wrong.

- a) What do you think Jesus means by "fire" in verse 49?
- b) Go back and read Luke 2:34-35. What is the connection between Simeon's words there and Jesus' words in 12:52-53?
- c) Are you willing to face division in your own family for the sake of the Kingdom?

6) Read 12:54-59, then consider the following: To what do you pay close attention and to what do you turn a blind eye? What areas of your life do you nurture and which do you neglect?

7) The harshness of Jesus' tone in 12:49-53 continues in 13:1-9; before, the focus was the cost of discipleship; here, it's the necessity of repentance.

a) The details (or historical accuracy) of verses 1-5 are less important than the primary message of Jesus' words. What do you understand him to be saying here?

b) Look again at Luke 3:9, then consider the parable Jesus tells in 13:6-9. There are multiple messages in this short parable—what do you perceive them to be?

8) More so than some of Jesus' parables, the story of the stooped woman in 13:10-17 can be seen as an *allegory*, a story in which the characters and events are symbols that stand for ideas about human life. It is not coincidental that the character in this story is a woman rather than a man. However much, then, this is yet another story of Jesus' conflict with Jewish religious leaders or a healing narrative, it as an allegory about women—and, by extension, any group that has been oppressed or marginalized—and the Kingdom. What do you make of it?

9) Luke 13:18-21 involves two short parables about the nature of the Kingdom. Jewish tradition had taught that with the coming of the Messiah, the Kingdom would be inaugurated, essentially materializing all at once. Here, however, Jesus seems to be saying that the Kingdom's beginnings will be seemingly insignificant relative to the final outcome and it will grow and spread gradually. What does that suggest to you about your own work as a follower of Jesus?

10) Jesus' teaching about who will enter the Kingdom and how can be seen as maddeningly paradoxical, leaving those desiring a definitive answer frustrated. Note:

--the door is narrow (verse 24) yet people will come from far and wide to enter;

--the owner will turn away many who assume they're invited (verse 27) while others who just show up from all over will enter (verse 29);

--some who show up first will enter last (if at all), others who show up last will enter first (verse 30);

--questions abound: why are some turned away but others not? did those turned away, though seeking the narrow door, try to enter by the wrong means? were they unqualified? did they lack faith? why wasn't God's grace extended to them? why didn't God even recognize them?

These verses speak to issues of election and grace, free will and determinism but, ultimately, provide little in the way of guidance, let alone guarantee. Two things are clear, however: we are to live striving to enter by the narrow door and, in the end, there will be many surprising reversals. What does this say to you as a follower of Jesus?

11) Luke 13:31-35 is a reminder that nothing of this world will trump God's will for the redemption of a broken creation and the restoration of the Kingdom. Jesus, as surely as he lived the life he had to live, must die the death he must die. Not Herod, not the Pharisees, not even Pontius Pilate can alter what must be done. What was true then is still true today. We can read the events of Jesus' day and see how God used them to advance God's redemptive plans. Look at the events of our day. Where do you see God at work, taking the actions of a broken creation and using them for an ultimate good?