

Luke 12:1-12

## Avoiding Shallow Discipleship

Last week my family had to make a trip to PA for my grandmother's funeral. To work funeral service details out, I had to meet with her pastor. In conversation he asked about the church scene here in the south. I told him there were a lot of churches, many big churches, and many people who say they are Christian. He replied, "I bet there are a lot of shallow Christians."

Shallow discipleship is not just a problem in the Bible Belt. Shallow discipleship has been a timeless threat. Jesus referenced it back in 8:13 when he told the Parable of the Sower.

- In our passage today, Jesus gives a few warnings on how to avoid shallow discipleship. As we will see, the way to deal with shallow discipleship is by *avoiding* a couple of things and *adding* one particular thing.

### **1. Avoiding contagious hypocrisy (1-3)**

- A couple of observations up front (v1)
  1. The crowds are swelling again. Countless thousands are stepping on each other.
  2. Jesus's focus is on his disciples, "he began to say to his disciples *first*."
- Jesus is deeply invested in his disciples. This lays the foundation for why we should care about discipleship.
- Jesus's care for his disciples comes out in a warning: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees."
- Leaven in Jewish teaching was often a symbol of evil and deceit.
- Note the word that Jesus uses to describe the Pharisees (v1): hypocrisy. Hypocrite/hypocrisy is pretending to be what one is not.
- It's a theater word to describe the mask that an actor wears.
- Hypocrisy is pervasive—like the effect of yeast. Hypocrisy taints everything.
- Jesus shows how hypocrisy is also pointless (v2-3).

- The art of hypocrisy is the skill at hiding and concealing.
- It's clear from vv2-3 that every hypocrite will be unmasked one day. That should be motivation enough to avoid hypocrisy.
- Notice though that Jesus is not calling his disciples hypocrites; he is warning them against the influence of it.
- In other words, hypocrisy is contagious.

Contagious hypocrisy is what Jesus is concerned about.

I once read a book with the title *Accidental Pharisees*. I can't honestly remember all that the author said—or if it was good—but the title is right. No one intentionally seeks a bad spiritual life. No one aims at hypocrisy. I don't know many people either who intentionally spend time around sick people in order to get sick. But sickness will be yours if you come in contact with someone who is contagious.

If someone is highly contagious, what should you do? *Avoid them!*

Application: a twofold warning:

1. If you are blatantly living a hypocritical life know that time is going to run out and you will be unmasked. Even down to things you have said and whispered behind closed doors (v3).
2. Be careful of how contagious hypocrisy is. If you know people, whose spirituality is just veneer—*be extremely careful...that lifestyle can be so contagious.*

### **Avoiding ungodly fear (4-7)**

- Everything that Jesus hits on from here till the end of this passage falls under the category of the fear of man. One of the largest contributing factors of shallow discipleship is the fear of man (next to love of money/misuse of wealth).

“When we succumb to the fear of man, we show no respect for God” –John Calvin.

- Before we unpack this, notice the words “my friends”.
- In the original it's the word *philos*. It's in the grouping of love-words in Greek (e.g. *Philadelphia*—love of brother, or *philosophy*—love of knowledge.)

- This alone is enough for us to want to seek roots deep down in discipleship. The fact that the sovereign ruler of all things, the One who created the world and upholds the universe by the word of his power...calls followers his loving friends!

Two things Jesus says to his friends that keep fear of man in check:

- 1) Don't overestimate the ability of another human.
- 2) Don't underestimate the authority and affection of God.

#### Don't overestimate the ability of other human beings (v4)

- Jesus says plainly that losing our life is a reality as his follower (martyrdom). That is on the horizon for his own life. Jewish and Roman leaders conspire together to have Jesus violently executed (cf. Ps 2:2).
- But there is a qualifier to that ability: after physical death...they have nothing more that they can do. Herod or Pilate could not control a single person's eternal destiny.

Part of putting the fear of man in perspective is to know that man's power and ability is very limited.

#### Don't underestimate the authority and affection of God for you (v5-7)

- Jesus's counsel in avoiding the fear of man is not to become more courageous. He does not merely say: Become bold. Man up! Instead, Jesus stresses a godly fear. A massive fear of God frees us from the smaller fear of man.
- Look at the word "authority" in v5: God has unlimited authority to cast people into hell.
- Jesus uses the word "Gehenna" which was a ravine located outside Jerusalem where trash was continually burned and dead bodies of criminals were thrown. No doubt you could smell flesh burn some days. It's a gruesome picture of the eternal judgment of the wicked.

Let me just emphasize the eternal, ongoing, never ending nature of hell.

(Rev 14:11) " <sup>11</sup>And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night,"

Some people are drawn to Jesus as Savior because of the vastness of his love, the freedom of forgiveness he offers. Others honestly are drawn to Jesus because the thought of eternal hell is so overwhelming. If you can't escape the thought of eternal torment in hell: *flee to Jesus.*

- Certainly God has a *lethal* side that we should fear.
- But disciples also need to see the *loving side* of God.
- To appreciate Jesus's illustration (v6-7) it helps to know a sparrow was the cheapest thing you could buy at the market. Sparrows fed really poor people.

(v6) You are not forgotten before God. If God notices some insignificant chintzy little birds used for cheap food, he notices you.

(v7) God values the tiniest detail about you. Even to the details of your hair count.

If cheap things don't escape God's notice or the hairs on our head, then we who hold eternal value don't escape his notice and care either. You are created in his image and are the object of his redemption.

- Is 49:15-16

15 “Can a woman forget her nursing child,  
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.

16 Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;”

When we are being honest, there may be times we feel that God has forgotten us - which is why we need to anchor our hope here.

*You are engraved in the palms of his hands*—possibly a reference to the nail-scarred hands of our Savior.

Sum: It's both the lethality and love of God that deepens and balances out discipleship. We need to be careful that we don't get these unbalanced. We don't choose one at the expense of the other.

### **Adding an unashamed confession of Christ (8-12)**

- This is the final piece of avoiding shallow discipleship.
- Acknowledging and confessing Christ is expressing our commitment before other people (e.g. baptism, church membership, or bearing witness to the gospel.)

(Rev 21:8) —there will be no shallow, uncommitted disciples in the new creation.

“<sup>8</sup> But as for the cowardly, the faithless... their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

- Confessing Jesus now, gives confidence on the day we appear before God in final judgment.
- Denying Jesus now will bring the ultimate denial that leads to eternal shame.

(v10) The unforgivable sin. Countless discussion has been around this saying. Here are a couple of thoughts that may help us better understand what Jesus refers to.

(Bock) “a decisive rejection of the Spirit’s message and work concerning Jesus.”

(Hughes) “a constant, persistent rejection of the Spirit’s witness.”

(Jn 16:14) The Spirit’s work is to put the spotlight on Jesus.

So it seems to describe a willful, stubborn rejection of the Spirit’s testimony about Christ that they take to the grave and into eternity.

Someone has said that if you are worried that you have committed the unforgivable sin, you probably have not.

### Conclusion:

So why do we need to make a big deal about shallow discipleship? I don’t sense that in TRB shallow discipleship is the norm, or encouraged, so why a warning?

First, it is God’s Word, which calls us to faith and preserves faithfulness.

D.A. Carson has insight into the recent history of the church, which calls us to be vigilant, “The history of the twentieth century testifies to how quickly a people can become ignorant of the Scripture...The church is never more than one generation or two from apostasy and oblivion. Only grace is a suffice hedge.” (*For the Love of God* Vol 1, Nov 9th)