

# *Your Life on Monday*

Luke 12:1-12

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 30, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>1</sup>Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another, he began to speak first to his disciples, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy. <sup>2</sup> Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. <sup>3</sup> Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops.

<sup>4</sup>“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. <sup>5</sup> But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! <sup>6</sup> Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight. <sup>7</sup> But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

<sup>8</sup>“And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; <sup>9</sup> but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God. <sup>10</sup> And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>11</sup> When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; <sup>12</sup> for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.” (Luke 12:1-12, NRSV)

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How many of you remember the television show *Candid Camera*? This was reality television when reality television had good taste. The premise was simple. Set up unsuspecting strangers in different potentially funny or awkward situations and let the cameras capture what happens next. One of the most famous pranks ever pulled off by the show took place in an ordinary elevator. Watch what happens:

*Watch clip at*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgRoiTWkBHU&t=3s>

Beneath the laughs there is a very sobering truth here. The influence of the crowd is powerful, powerful enough to influence us to act against our instincts, our beliefs, even our values. Every single one of us in this room has been, at one time or another, negatively influenced by others around us in this sort of way. It’s so hard to swim upstream, even when swimming upstream is the right way to swim.

Luke tells us that at this point a crowd of 10,000 or more has gathered around Jesus, so many people that they are trampling over one another. As Jesus continues to make his way towards Jerusalem and the destiny there that awaits him, the tension is growing. And so right there in the midst of the crowd, Jesus huddles up with his disciples. Sometimes sports broadcasts will mic up a coach in the middle of a team huddle before the game or at half-time, allowing the whole television audience to listen in on the coach’s message to the team. In essence, that’s what’s happening here. Jesus’ words to his disciples are never secret words, in part because there is always the chance that others listening in might hear something that leads them to join their ranks.

Jesus’ message to the team here is that the game is about to get hard. The opposition is growing more and more intense. For that reason, this is a time for focus, for preparedness, for unwavering loyalty. As they follow him, half-heartedness will not do. That’s essentially the message Jesus gives in this huddle.

Here’s why, in Jesus’ words: “**Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy.**” You understand yeast, right? When you work even a small amount of yeast into dough as a leavening agent, it changes the whole nature of the dough. The yeast converts the fermentable sugars present in the dough into the gas carbon dioxide, causing the dough to expand or rise as the gas forms pockets or bubbles. Only a small amount of yeast is needed to cause a transformation that is slow, insidious and constant. You almost don’t notice the change until it’s happened.

So what is this slow, insidious, constant yeast that the disciples need to watch out for? In a word, hypocrisy. That is the danger here. Now, we learned last week that ‘hypocrisy’ is a word taken from the ancient world of theater. A hypocrite was somebody who got on stage and pretended to be somebody he or she was not. And as we also learned last week, some religious leaders in

Jesus' day called Pharisees were hypocrites. They went around following all sorts of religious practices and ceremonies to give off the *impression* that they were righteous before God. Behind the masks, however, it was a different story. They ignored justice, neglected love, sought self-glory, and burdened their followers with a suffocating amount of religion, deceiving them into believing that they must clean themselves up and do all the right things before they were worthy to come to God.

This kind of hypocrisy is always a sham. You pretend you are devoted to God but really you are living for yourself, trying to make something out of yourself by your own efforts, your own righteousness, your own goodness. Sometimes this is called "functional atheism". A religious person gives off the impression publicly that he or she is devoted to God but then in the reality of day-to-day life that person lives according to his or her terms. As writer Parker Palmer puts it, "Functional atheism is the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with me." You give lip service on Sunday morning that God is in charge of your life, but then go out and live the rest of the week as if he is not in charge.

Jesus makes clear here that this is an extraordinarily short-sighted way to live because, as he puts it, you can only fool people for so long. In time everything covered will be uncovered. Everything secret will become known. Everything hidden in the dark will be brought into the light. Every hushed word ever spoken will be shouted from the rooftops. If you pretend you are something you are not, you might perhaps fool some of the people some of the time, but a day will come when everybody gets to peek behind the curtain. In the end you won't fool anybody. That's a sobering thought, isn't it?

So why would anybody choose hypocrisy? The reason is always fear. People are afraid to completely trust God with their lives, afraid to trust that God's Word always knows best, afraid to give up control. People are also afraid to admit, even to themselves, that they actually have rejected God by rejecting his leading in their lives. We all want to be seen well by others, especially in religious communities. Maybe we are even afraid of what God will think if he finds out what we are really like. Perception is so important to us, so very important.

Jesus addresses this fear when he says, "**I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more.**" Every parent knows what it's like to comfort a child who comes home from school after being teased or ridiculed by peers. We tell our kids that what others think about them doesn't matter. But then if we are honest, what others

think of us, as parents, in our work, in our marriages, even in the church, it matters just as much to us. In Jesus' day his disciples didn't only have to worry about what other thought about them, but also had to worry about what others would *do* to them. It was dangerous to declare loyalty to Jesus. In fact, nearly every one of these men was ultimately executed because of his association with Jesus.

Yet Jesus' message is clear. Others in this world actually have *no* ultimate power over our lives. Think about it, what's the absolute worst thing another human being can do to you? Take your earthly life by killing you or make your years on this earth full of misery. That's it. No other human being has any say in what happens after that in terms of your ultimate destiny in eternity. That's God's arena. God alone has power over ultimate life and death, over eternal condemnation or salvation, over timeless joy or misery. And this is why God alone is worthy of our fear. As Jesus puts it here, "**I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!**"

And yet, once we come to know God, to know God's true character and the way God actually sees us, we understand the nature of that fear. This is not meant to be terror but awe, not dread but reverence. How can we not bow humbly before the one who holds eternity in his hands? But that same one who holds our lives in his hands loves us and cares for us like no other. And not blindly, mind you. God *knows* us, every last bit of us. God has every hair on your head numbered, as task much easier with some of us than others! He sees it all, which means he sees the junk in us that we don't even see. And yet God *still* loves us. We can come to him as we are. As Jesus reminds us, God cares deeply for even the most common, ordinary bird. If God cares that much for the birds most of us don't even notice, imagine how much more God cares for us!

This is why people who have discovered this truth find it possible to live without fear of anything or anybody in this world. If the world hates me, tries to ruin me, seeks to kill me, or even succeeds on all counts, I still have nothing to fear because the creator of the universe, the only one whose opinion and judgment ultimately matter, the one who holds my destiny in his hands, loves me unconditionally. It's why Paul could write, "**For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.**"<sup>1</sup> If I'm alive I'll live every day for Jesus. And if I die, well my life in Christ will then immediately and eternally flourish in infinitely greater ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 1:21, NIV

This is why Jesus demands full devotion from his disciples, regardless of what lies ahead in life. As the huddle breaks and they are sent out into the world they must not fear the world but revere God and rest in his love and grace. Christ is not only our Savior but our Lord. He loves and forgives us, but then demands in response our obedience and devotion, that we trust him in all things, all times, all places because he is Lord over all creation and always knows what is best for his creatures. Jesus' teaching here and elsewhere is therefore a rebuke against any sort of casual, half-hearted, relaxed Christianity that is all too common in the church. Followers of Jesus are to be dedicated and single-minded in their devotion. A disciple of Christ is the person who lives for Christ and is not afraid to die for Christ.

You see, there is another sort of yeast we must watch out for, a hypocrisy that is just as insidious as the sort we saw in the Pharisees. Yes, there are people who are not following Christ who, when they are around the church pretend they are followers, but there are also people who *are* followers of Christ who, out in the world, pretend they are not followers. Think of Peter the night before Jesus' death. Jesus has been arrested and Peter has followed him to the courtyard of the Temple where Jesus has been taken for trial. It's a dangerous environment. Sure enough, people start recognizing Peter and pointing him out as one of Jesus' followers, which he was. But Peter denies it, not once but three times. In doing so he's being a hypocrite, pretending to be somebody he is not.

So Jesus warns, **“Everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God.”** If you have given your life to following Christ, which is what it means to be a Christian, but then you go out into a world that will always, to some degree, be hostile to the ways of Christ, and then out of fear you live in the world as if you *are not* a follower of Jesus, then you have allowed the yeast of hypocrisy to work its way through your life. You are a follower of Jesus pretending not to be a follower of Jesus.

David Palmer, our Fall Retreat speaker a few weeks ago, reminded us that in the Roman Empire the Caesars would set up statues of themselves – images of themselves, if you will – in every corner of the conquered empire. Those statues served to remind the people living there that this land was under the rule of Caesar. He was in charge. It was his kingdom. In a similar way, Christ sends his followers out into all the world, into all the ordinary places that our lives take us every week – into our homes, our neighborhoods, our schools, our work places, the public square – so that our

lives, formed in the image of Christ, might serve a similar purpose by declaring that God's Kingdom has come through Christ. It all belongs to Christ and is all being redeemed by Christ.

The world, however, will not always appreciate this reminder. Have you figured that out yet? People who are pre-occupied with ordering life on their terms do not want to face the reality that life is ultimately not ordered on their terms but on God's terms. This is why Jesus at one point talked about discipleship this way: **“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”**<sup>2</sup>

There's a hard truth here. If you find yourself out in the world moving right along with the crowd, sharing the values, priorities and habits of most of the people around you, it's very likely that you are not following Jesus out in the world because following Jesus in this world is always going to mean you are swimming upstream. The life of a Christian ought to look radically different than the lives of those around us in the world who are not Christians. Does yours? Does mine?

You see, we are baptized believers gathered here in this community, men and women who have, with our words and with our hearts, committed ourselves to Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Every Sunday morning we sing songs of praise and worship to Christ. We make vows and recite creeds to articulate our faith. We sit under Christ's Word in the scriptures. We have been baptized in his waters and marked as his family. Regularly, we feast from his table, declaring as we do our need to be constantly nourished by his grace. If we then turn around and go out into the world and live the rest of each week arranging life on our terms rather than his terms, giving little or no thought or effort to following Christ's lead in the ordinary events and circumstances of our lives, then we too are essentially living as functional atheists. Some of us here in this church are living this way. There are people in every church living this way.

And I get it. It's not easy. To swim against the current is not easy. To acknowledge our devotion to Christ in a world opposed to his ways is not easy. To trust parts of God's Word that are absolutely rejected by most of society is not easy. To stand for the truth when everybody else has embraced a lie is not easy. To hold to the very politically-incorrect view that all people are, by nature, sinful and in need of God's forgiveness is an

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:13-14, NRSV

increasingly unpopular view today. To give up on the empty pursuit of the American Dream, specifically that having more stuff and more comfort will lead to a better life, will make those still committed to this dream uncomfortable. It's not easy. To stand with those on the margins who are on the margins because others have put them there, will not be welcomed by those who put them there and want to keep them there. To declare that we do not put our ultimate hope in political leaders or policies is, these days, counter-cultural. To bear witness to the reality that there is no salvation for anybody anywhere outside of Jesus Christ is not a popular claim to hold today. It never has been. And as gracious and loving as we may be in our witness – because we are never called to shove our beliefs or faith in the face of anybody – the very way will lead our lives, if they are being led by Christ, will offend.

If we are honest, there are some of us sitting here today who realize, “This is not the way I’m living. I’ve dedicated my life to Christ but I’m not living out in the world as one dedicated to Christ.” And again, the reason is always fear. Fear of missing out. Fear of being ridiculed or rejected. Fear of letting go. But if, by the grace of God, you can honestly face this hard truth of hypocrisy in your life, give thanks. That’s a good beginning. Jesus is meaning to encourage his disciples as he huddles them up this morning. There is another way to live. Heed Jesus’ warning here. The short term gain you are living for is not worth the long term loss. One day the elevator door will open and you want to be found facing the right way, not having turned the wrong way because the crowd around you has influenced you to do so. This is the day to turn around.

This is a serious matter, a sobering matter. Nothing makes that more clear than what Jesus says in verse 10, **“And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.”** I remember the first time I read this verse. I was in high school and stumbled across it and it immediately shook me to my core. Had I committed the unforgivable sin? I had no idea what it meant to blaspheme the Holy Spirit, which made it worse because if I didn’t know what this sin was how was I to know how to avoid it. I went the very next day after school to our youth pastor, Rick, and opened up my Bible, pointed to this verse, and asked him, “Rick, I’m afraid I may have committed the unforgivable sin.” And he looked back at me and with all seriousness said, “Yes, Jeff, there’s a pretty good chance that you have.” No, he didn’t say that. He gently explained to me what I will gently explain to you this morning.

If you live your life ignorant of what God is doing in this world, even to the point of taking a stand against God’s movement and work in the world, but then at some point when the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to see your error and your mind is changed and you embrace Christ, God’s forgiveness will be yours. Think of the Apostle Paul who, in ignorance, made it his life’s mission to persecute Christians and destroy the church. But then when the Spirit convicted him of the truth, he repented and instantly knew God’s forgiveness to a depth he never thought possible.

On the other hand, if the Spirit moves in your life to reveal to you the truth about Christ in an effort to lead you towards trusting him in faith but, for your whole life, you reject the Spirit, then by that rejection you ultimately will cut yourself off from the very forgiveness that otherwise would freely be yours.

Think about it this way. If you have a fatal disease and there is a readily available medicine that, if you take it, will cure you completely and permanently of that disease, what is the only danger to you? The only danger is that you will refuse to take the medicine because either you don’t believe you are sick, don’t believe it will help, or some other foolish reason. Worse, imagine now that you openly campaign to try to persuade other sick people from taking the medicine. Have you not set yourself up for righteous condemnation? This is what it means to blaspheme the Holy Spirit, to categorically reject Christ as Lord and Savior for your entire life and then to campaign for others to reject Christ as well. A person who rejects salvation cannot know salvation. That’s simple logic. But as others have put it, if someone is anxious about having committed this sin against the Holy Spirit, their anxiety is a clear sign that they have not.<sup>3</sup>

Still, the warning is given for a reason. This yeast is insidious and deadly. It’s relatively easy for us here on Sunday mornings to profess our devotion to, and dependence upon, Christ. But tomorrow morning it may not be so easy. Right? So many people around us live in complete ignorance of, and even defiance towards, God. So the tendency within each of us, encouraged by the crowd around us, is to pledge Sunday morning our commitment to live life on God’s terms but then to leave this place and immediately begin living life on our terms again. And before long the elevator doors open and we’ve turned completely around the wrong way. Truly, the pathway through life that goes after Jesus, though it leads to life, is often a narrow, difficult, lonely pathway.

<sup>3</sup> N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 150.

That's why I love how Jesus ends this teaching: **"When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say."** Jesus acknowledges here that this is a tough assignment. His specific example here of representing Christ in an environment that is hostile to Christ is one of many examples he could have chosen. If we follow Jesus, not just here on Sunday mornings but in all the places he leads us the rest of the week, there are going to be countless instances when we do not have it in us to live as Christ wants us to live.

But here's the good news. Jesus knows this about us. And his assurance here is that he will do in us and through us what we cannot do ourselves if we will allow him to do so. There is no moment when Christ, by the presence of the Holy Spirit, is not with you. Not a single moment. And as I heard somebody put it recently, the Holy Spirit is with us to help us to do whatever it is that we cannot do on our own, which is quite a lot actually.

Abraham and Sarah were a sterile, childless old couple and yet God used them to become the patriarchs of a great nation. Moses fled Egypt as a fugitive but God sent him back to save a nation of slaves. David was a shepherd boy God used to slay a warrior giant. Mary was a nobody-peasant girl in whose womb God conceived the divine Savior of the world. God changed Paul from the church's biggest persecutor to the church's biggest champion. A life surrendered to Christ, no matter how ordinary, how broken, how corrupt, how weak, can become in God's hands a powerful witness and vehicle for the in-breaking of God's Kingdom in this world. There is nothing in you that could possibly disqualify you from being added to this list other than your lifelong insistence that something else in this world other than God is to be feared.

With that in mind, I can't think of a better way to end this message than with Jesus' words from Luke 9:23-25:

**If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?**

Amen.



## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Luke 11:37-54 again. There's a lot here. What part stands out to you? Why do you think you were meant to notice that part first?
2. Jesus doesn't wash his hands before lunch. Why is the Pharisee offended by this? Can you think of a contemporary example of this today, where somebody might similarly be offended?
3. Jesus is often described as 'meek and mild'. Does he seem meek and mild here to you? What is the significance of how Jesus is presented here in this scene?
4. Of the six 'woes' directed here to the Pharisees and the scribes, which one has your name on it? Which one hits close to home for you? Why?
5. Why do people like Jeff's friend feel they can't come to church as they are? What is it that leads people to this place in life, to this view of God?
6. Do you feel you can come to God *today exactly as you are* without making any effort to clean yourself up before you come? Why or why not?
7. Anne Lamott writes, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us." What do you think she means? Do you agree?
8. How do we ever become clean? That is, how do we ever live the sorts of lives we inherently know we were made to live?

### Table to Table Question

#### *A question for kids and adults to answer together*

When God looks at your life, exactly as it is right now, what do you think he says?