

Luke Chapter 12, What Discipleship Involves

The Gospel of Luke isn't just information about Jesus as told by another Scripture author. It's not something interesting for believers in Jesus to read. It's much more, and we shouldn't miss it. Luke and Acts go together as one continuous book that is basically missional in purpose. Luke wrote these two books as one story, the story of God coming to earth to call followers to continue His mission of reaching out to all the world with the offer of salvation prior to the coming judgment. So, in this one long continuous (Luke-Acts) book, Luke explains who Jesus is, what He taught, what following Him is like, and what His followers are to be doing. It's not an apologetic, nor is it evangelistic. It's teaching; it's instruction to us, who believe in Jesus, how to live as a disciple and what we're here to do.

Chapter 12 of Luke is a good example of Luke's purpose in writing. It consists of a series of teachings on how to live as a follower of Jesus. It obviously doesn't include *all* that's important, nor even necessarily what's *most* important. But it does teach the radically new kind of life expected of a believer, that's expected of *us*. Let's look at this chapter, teaching-by-teaching. (We've discussed the Parable of the Rich Fool, vv. 13-21, in a prior Sunday School lesson, so we'll look at that here in summary fashion.)

Verse 1a,b. A multitude of people gathered to hear Jesus. But Jesus was more intent on teaching His disciples than addressing the crowd. So vv. 2-53 are teaching for His followers. Only at the very end of the chapter does Jesus have something to say to the mob.

Vv. 1c, 2-3. Hypocrisy! We pretend to be what we really aren't. It's easy to live a fantasy, to want others to suppose we're more spiritual than we are. We too easily can show off, impress others, but God knows the reality. Ananias and Sapphira tried this gambit, and we know how that turned out. In verses 2 and 3, Jesus reveals something scary: Not only does God know what we say and think in private, He's going to make it public some future day. Ouch! We've just been warned: We'd better be totally honest with ourselves, with reality, and control ourselves because we live before God, in His holy presence. We must be obsessed with truth, even in our innermost being.

Vv. 4-7. This paragraph is in two related parts. First is an admonition not to fear anyone, not even those who kill us, but, instead, we're to fear God who has authority over our eternal destiny. And second is a promise that to God we're exceedingly valuable. We're commanded to love God, and biblical love includes a fear of God. But God also knows each of us intimately and cares deeply about us. Persecution of Jesus' followers, even martyrdom, is expected. But this promise is to sustain us through it. We're to live faithfully, not hypocritically, not fearful of death. God loves us, so we can trust Him with our soul.

Vv. 8-10. In the context of persecution, we're to be absolutely faithful in bearing witness. Even if there's no persecution, we're to be sharing our faith with others. That isn't only our mission, it's what delights God. This means in public, not merely in the privacy (and safety) of a church meeting. If we're committed to Jesus, we'll share the Gospel. But if we fail to do what God expects, which is essentially denying Jesus, He will judge us. Refusal to share the Gospel with others reflects a refusal to be committed to Jesus. Mission is just this important to Luke. . . to God.

The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit needs to be explained: Everything the Son did in His earthly, incarnate ministry was in the power of the Holy Spirit, so if one harbors an attitude that rejects that work of God in Christ, then God's plan of salvation has been rejected and there can be no forgiveness of sins. We are being sent into a hostile world, and we must not respond to persecution by denying Jesus. Suffering due to persecution is part of the Gospel.

Vv. 11-12. The same Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus is available to us who are following Him. The Son stepped into a world absolutely determined not to have Him rule over them, a world already saturated with cruelty and hatred. Into such a vicious world, He sends us to continue His work of calling people to the Kingdom and preparing for it those who respond. We're to be suffering servants, just as He. As He relied on God, so do we. The Book of Acts confirms that this promise was fulfilled, as it was dramatically when Martin Luther was called to defend His beliefs. God won't abandon us, but we need to be faithful.

Vv. 13-21. There's a problem confronting disciples. Money, and things. The world throws before us a million interests to distract us and things to desire. We need to exercise great self-discipline and reject all that we might lust for, so that we can please God instead and do His work. Security in having things can replace the opposition of being faithful to Jesus and the rejection that such faithfulness includes. We need to fear prosperity as much as we might fear human authorities over God. By the way, verse 21 warns us not to store up things for ourselves; we could apply that to the Gospel. We are commanded to share it, not keep it to ourselves.

Vv. 22-34. In this long passage, Jesus tells His followers, and us, that there's no need for anxiety about the things of life. What matters, indeed, what we're to be focused on, obsessed with even, is the Kingdom. If we're God's servants, we trust Him to meet our basic needs so that we fulfill our mission of evangelizing the world. If we're doing God's work, we can count on His care and provision. In fact, Jesus goes further and instructs us to share with others what we have – even if what we have is little. Doing that pleases God. As God is generous to us, we should be generous to others. What do we really care about, things or people? Our needs and desires and interests, or God's will?

Vv. 35-48. This is another long passage. Jesus brings up another topic, readiness for His Return. It seems that Jesus changes direction here, but not really. Everything in this chapter has to do with how a disciple of His is to live. And here, we're to live in light of the future. The key future event is His Return. And His Return isn't just to influence our attitudes, but to control our present-day life. Jesus is going to be absent for a period, but He will return, and when He returns the promised, long-awaited Kingdom will be a reality. But there's something else: When He returns, it'll also be to judge us. Yes. Our works, how we treated others, and our faithfulness are going to be evaluated, and we'd better be found prepared for that judgment, or else. We're here, evidently, as stewards, responsible for carrying out the will of God that has been entrusted to us. We've been called to serve God. If we ignore this responsibility, are indifferent to it, or are careless about it, we'll have to answer to Jesus at His return in glory. There will be degrees of faithfulness, of course, but we'll be held accountable to the extent of what was given to us. One of the most compelling verses in Scripture is here, "From whom much has been given, much will be required." We in the West have been given vastly more than any believers at any other place or time in history. That means we're heavily responsible. Let's wake up to this reality!

Vv. 49-53. Verse 49 defines Jesus' ministry in one brief sentence: "I have come to bring fire on earth." Fire represents judgment, and also it represent the Holy Spirit's work. Salvation thru Judgment is a central theme of all Scripture. It comes to a focus at the cross, which Jesus alludes to with the word, baptism. But, Why the word "baptism"? The word refers to judgment, such as the Flood in Genesis, or the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. So Jesus understands that the cross means he personally will experience the judgment of God upon all sin.

There's a prediction here of the responses people will have to Jesus' atoning work. Some will respond gladly with faith, others not only won't receive it but will be hostile to it. People will be divided, families separated, over Him. All humanity is necessarily confronted by a critical, fateful decision: What to do with Jesus. Everyone must—*must*—take sides; there's no neutral position. It's inescapable. Peace will come in the promised future Kingdom, not here and now. Disciples sharing the Gospel need to understand this, or discouragement will bring the mission to a halt. We can expect to be rejected.

Vv. 54-58. The chapter ends with Jesus' address to the crowd. He uses the same word with which the chapter opened, hypocrisy, and Luke mentions crowds here, as at the beginning. These indicate that this chapter, having bookends, is a unit. To the mob, Jesus makes an appeal for understanding. It takes the form of a rebuke, though. They should have known from Daniel's prophecies that it was exactly the right time for the expected Messiah to appear. And all that God was doing right before their eyes thru Jesus necessarily means He's the One. The final paragraph is an evangelistic mini-parable. Just as it's better to admit guilt and settle a debt out of court, rather than experience the judgment of life in prison, it's better to trust Jesus than to face God's eventual (certain) wrath. What a message we have for others!

Dear Reader: Jesus' words were for that initial band of disciples. But Luke wrote this *for us*. We're to join those initial disciples in the mission that Jesus gave them. We're not simply to believe in Jesus and . . . that's all. No, we're to live as Jesus instructed, and we're to pass on to others the same Gospel that we believe so that others can be saved too.

Why does discipleship matter? We in the evangelical world today suppose that discipleship is an option for those who want to go further in the faith. All that matters, we suppose, is to believe in Jesus. No. Let's be clear on this. There's no such thing, biblically, as a believer who isn't a disciple. If we say we believe in Jesus, the teachings and exhortations of Luke 12 are for us, today. Discipleship isn't an option. It's what Christianity is all about.

But there's something else even more important: To be a "disciple" means to be so committed to the Master that we reproduce Him in our own lives. So we absorb his teachings and carry them out; we observe what the Master does so we can do the same; and we study the character of the Master so that we can be just like Him. The meaning of life (in this present era, anyway) is to be Christ-like. Anything else, anything other than Christ-likeness, is a waste of a life.

Finally, notice the barb in v. 58: It's better to pay up rather than have to experience the alternative. Yes, discipleship is demanding. But it's better than the alternative, which is God's fierce indignation. So, let's be faithful.