

LUKE 12 Study 1 Vs 1-3

Although this chapter isn't as familiar as the Sermon on the Mount, it is still a complete sermon in its own right – it hangs together. And as the greatest preacher who ever lived, Jesus has one big point, which he expands on and applies throughout the chapter. In this study we are just going to look at that main point, in verses 1 to 3.

Jesus is surrounded by a vast crowd as far as the eye can see (vs 1). He begins by warning his disciples.

A SURPRISING WARNING

It is surprising because Jesus is calling the crowd to “watch out” for a certain group of people.

If you've grown up with the gospels you'll probably think that this did not need to be said. We know the Pharisees are the bad guys! But this crowd didn't. To them, the Pharisees were hugely respected.

The Pharisees weren't religious professionals. They were a lay movement, and a Jewish sect, and they were the main religious body in Jesus day in the area Jesus was preaching. The people held them in great honour. They taught the law and how to interpret it. They were serious about God.

One of the reasons the Pharisees existed was because they opposed the drift towards the secular humanism of their day. They wanted people to know God and be faithful to him. They stood firm against the liberal drift of the priests and Levites.

Jesus begins speaking to thousands and says “Watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees”. In effect he's saying “don't listen to them, listen to me”. He's setting himself above them and calling people away from them.

Just before Jesus preaches this sermon he's been speaking to the Pharisees directly, in a very uncompromising way! See 11:44 The Pharisees are dangerous, but the people don't know they are dangerous. If a grave is unmarked – it's simply a piece of land. Jews you were in danger of becoming unclean by walking over an unmarked grave, because you might have contact with a corpse. Jesus' warning was necessary because the crowd of thousands simply didn't know how dangerous the Pharisees were.

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It's important that we see this, because its impact to the original hearers is crucial for us grasping the importance of what Jesus is saying here. Jesus is putting his life in danger by saying what he does. Humanly speaking, his teaching against the Pharisees leads to his death. So, they must have been very dangerous or Jesus wouldn't take so much time in warning against them. Whether we go their way or Jesus way is right at the heart of what Jesus has to say. And that's a penetrating, controversial statement.

A SPECIFIC WARNING

He doesn't simply warn against the Pharisees, but he warns against "the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy". Leaven is yeast - just a little affects everything it comes into contact with.

For us, hypocrisy often means "doing something you know doesn't fit with what you say". When we think of a hypocrite, we think of a self conscious fraudster. The preacher who asks for money for God's work when he's driving a nice car and living in a mansion. The politician who launches a "back to basics" morality campaign while sleeping with his secretary. We tend to think hypocrisy is self conscious insincerity.

However, for all the wicked things the Pharisees do in the Bible, it is clear that they are not all insincere. They are not pantomime villains – no they are more serious and dangerous than that. When Saul persecuted Christians before he met Jesus on the Damascus road, he sincerely believed he was doing the right thing (I think his letters seem to suggest that). Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus in John 3 shows a man sincere about his faith. The Pharisee's were men who genuinely believed they were right with God, and who genuinely did what they believed was right in obedience to God.

So what does Jesus mean when he warns us of their "hypocrisy"? Well, it's this – that they are different on the inside to what they appear to be on the outside. On the outside they appear to be men who are right with God. But on the inside, they are not right with God. That is different to being self consciously insincere. The really dangerous thing about the Pharisees is that they don't know they are not right with God. But beware! Deep down their hearts are not changed.

Look at what Jesus has already said to the Pharisees in 11:39. And remember what Jesus said to a Pharisee, Nicodemus, who came to him by night. He said "You must be born again" (See John 3). He told him he needed to be changed completely! He told him there was no spiritual life in him.

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This is really important for how we apply this warning. Being born again – trusting Christ and being a repentant person, knowing you are a sinner but knowing you are forgiven, and still sinning is not hypocrisy in this sense. Sin by itself does not make you a hypocrite and a Pharisee.

The Pharisees believed that holiness was about external things. They believed sincerely that sin was about where you went and who you spent time with and what you ate and drank. The Pharisees acted in a way that made sure their religious duties were performed so other people could see them. They were different on the outside to how they were in secret, by themselves. The Pharisees just weren't bothered about the gap between their private life and public life – they were blind to it. The Pharisees loved the praise of men and avoided suffering.

The deepest problem with the Pharisees was that they did not go to Jesus. They did not listen to Jesus. Their religion lead them away from Jesus. They did not worship Jesus. They were part of the line of people in the Bible who heard God speak, but who ignored God and wanted to silence him. Look at 11:47-51. They were rather Jesus wasn't there. They plotted to kill Jesus.

The choice throughout this sermon in Luke 12 is between the Pharisees or Jesus. Outward religion or inward salvation by Jesus. Notice how many times Jesus says "I tell you" in the chapter (verse 4, 8, 22, 27 etc). Jesus is saying "listen to me", not yourself, not anyone else. He changes us internally. He brings a real relationship with God.

A NECESSARY WARNING - See verse 3.

Jesus is not simply being controversial or trying to stir up unrest by warning against the Pharisees – he is saying there is a future coming. When the hypocrites will be unmasked. When it will be clear who has hearts that belong to God, and who does not.

Verses 2 and 3 are truly terrifying verses. If you've ever been through the Christianity Explored course you'll remember the talk on judgement Rico Tice gives, where he enters a room and gets us to imagine the walls covered with everything you've ever said or done or thought. He says God sees it all and God will judge it all. There is nothing hidden that will not be uncovered. We will all stand before him as judge. That's a Biblical truth. There are no empty words in this word. There are no actions that don't count to God.

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But we should also see what Jesus is saying in the context of Luke 12. He is talking about the Pharisees, and he is clearly saying that one day they will be unmasked for the religious hypocrites they are. Why the emphasis on speech and whispering? Just look back at 11:53-54. The Pharisees are waiting to catch Jesus out. And as the gospel goes on we see the secret plotting, of the Pharisees behind closed doors. They want to kill Jesus and go to great lengths to do it. That is concealed at the moment, but Jesus knows, and it will be brought into the open.

The Pharisees role in the death of Jesus does reveal who they really are. They work in league with the Romans who they never normally would work with. This plot to get rid of Jesus shows that underneath they are no different to the world. They are revealed for the haters of God they really are! They will be judged for it. Their exposure as this gospel progresses is a mini fulfilment of this warning. You can't fool God.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Please give more thought to the application questions - make sure you spend time on these.

Please don't ask a question you don't understand!

- What do we learn about the setting of this chapter in verse 1?
- Who does Jesus speak to first? What does he tell them? Why might that be a surprising warning?
- Look back to 11:37-54. Where has Jesus just been? How has Jesus already spoken about how dangerous they are (see vs 44)?
- What, specifically, is the "leaven" of the Pharisees?
- What do we think of, when we think about hypocrisy?
- Is this what Jesus is talking about with the Pharisees? What are they like - see 11:39-43? How might you describe the root problem with the Pharisees?
- Why do we need to hear this warning? Why is "Pharisee" religion attractive? Where can we see it today? (Be careful to keep this as a challenge to the group, and don't let it descend to "look how terrible the world/other people who call themselves Christians are")
- What warning does Jesus bring in verses 2-3? How does this relate to his warning?
- What are the Pharisee's covering up and saying in the dark? (See 11:53-54)?