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**The Gospel of Luke**  
**XLI. The One to Fear**  
**Luke 12:1-12**

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The disciples must have been getting nervous. Not that long ago, Jesus had told them that He was on His way to Jerusalem – and that, there in Jerusalem, He would be put to death by the religious leadership.<sup>1</sup> The disciples, back then, had not really known what to make of this foretelling. In fact, after the second time Jesus told them about this, Luke straightforwardly states that the disciples did not understand this saying and that they were also afraid to ask Him about it.

But, at this point, I imagine, they were starting to sense that what Jesus had told them might be a real possibility. Because they had seen how His encounters with the religious leaders were becoming more and more hostile. Last week, Jesus had spoken some of His strongest criticism yet against the scribes and Pharisees – which had, in return, only intensified their efforts to trip Him up and gain the grounds to take action against Him.<sup>2</sup> The disciples surely must have felt a growing sense of unease.

And, one imagines, they were getting nervous not just for Jesus, but also for themselves. If, as Jesus had foretold, the religious leaders were going to put Jesus to death in Jerusalem, then surely the disciples had begun to wonder, with increasing concern, what that might mean for them. They were publicly identified with Jesus as His disciples – could the threat against Jesus carry them along with Him to a cross? Perhaps they were even recalling, with new trepidation, something Jesus had said to them immediately following His first prediction of His crucifixion, that, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”*<sup>3</sup> Maybe those words were not just a rhetorical flourish – what if Jesus really had meant literally what He had said? What if, because of their association with Jesus, their lives were in danger?

Well, we can’t know for certain that this is what the disciples were thinking – the Bible doesn’t tell us. But it would explain both why and what Jesus speaks to them this morning. After last week’s very heated confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees, a great crowd has now gathered to watch the fireworks continue. But before addressing the crowd, Jesus first speaks words of reassurance to His disciples, addressing the very sort of fears we have imagined. Well, words of reassurance – sort of. By which I mean probably not the words of reassurance the disciples wanted to hear – as in, *“Don’t worry, be happy! Nothing bad is going to happen to you.”* That may be the reassurance the disciples wanted, but it is not the reassurance Jesus gives.

What Jesus says to them, first of all, is this: *“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.”* In other words, the scribes and Pharisees are getting it all wrong – they are on the wrong side of God and of history. They claim to be the friends of God, but in rejecting God’s Messiah they show themselves to be the enemies of God. They are hypocrites, and all of this is going to come out in Jerusalem through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Therefore, says Jesus, don’t be afraid of the scribes and Pharisees. Well, actually what He says is this: *“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body”* – meaning the scribes and Pharisees – *“and after that have nothing more that they can do.”* Which, when coupled with Jesus’ next statement that anything the disciples have said in private of their allegiance to Jesus will also come out in Jerusalem, hardly seems like an antidote to their fears. What I imagine they hear Jesus saying to them, at this point, is that, because of their allegiance to Jesus, they have every reason to be afraid for their lives also – *“those who kill the body”* – but don’t be afraid of those people who might kill you, they’re all just a bunch of hypocrites. Not very reassuring, is it?

It’s what Jesus says next that is the real antidote to their fears, the real reassurance they can hold on to, on the road to Jerusalem and well beyond. He says: *“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!”* Are you feeling reassured yet? Clearly, Jesus’s words require a little unpacking. He is speaking, of course, of His Heavenly Father – for while the religious leaders may have the power to end the disciples’ earthly lives, only God has the power to then cast them into an eternity of hell. *“Fear him!”* Jesus tells His disciples. But how is this reassuring – to move from fearing the religious leaders who might kill them to fearing the God who could put them in hell?

Well, it all has to do with what it means to fear God. To fear that the religious leaders might kill them is fear defined as anxiety, hopelessness, and terror. But to fear God, says the Bible, is something else – it is the beginning of wisdom.<sup>4</sup> It is a fear defined not by anxiety, but by awe and reverence. A fear defined not by hopelessness, but by praise of His glory. And though we do well to remember that the Lord God is the all-powerful Creator of Heaven and Earth, the One who has made us, and by whom our eternal fate shall indeed be decided – it is nonetheless not a fear defined by terror, but rather by the great truth that the Author of all things and the Decider of our souls loves us and counts us as precious in His sight. *“Yes, I tell you,”* says Jesus, *“fear him!”* Because in His hands, we are safe. In His plan, we have a part. In his heart, we have a home. And in His eyes, we are His precious children:

*Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

To fear God is not abject terror before a hostile deity. It is not the hopeless trembling of a victim before his executioner. Rather the fear of God is that of a child before a loving parent. It is an awe, reverence, dependency, and trust that He who made us will also keep us and preserve us and bless us evermore. And what Jesus is telling His disciples, and telling us also, is that if we let that rightful fear of God live at the very center of our being – then all our other fears, our earthly

fears, can and shall be overcome. Fear God, Jesus is saying to us, and we don't need to fear anything else. Because to fear God before all else, the Divine and Eternal One whose love for us is so deep and so personal that He has even counted the hairs on our head, is to know that nothing else that we fear can ever separate us from that love.<sup>5</sup> To fear God first is to know that nothing else that we fear in this life will ever be allowed to have the last word over our circumstances and outcomes.<sup>6</sup> To fear God first, before all our other fears, is to know that nothing else that we fear in these earthly lives of ours can ever hold a candle to the immensity of the power and goodness and love of the One who holds us in the palm of His hand.<sup>7</sup> *"His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me."*<sup>8</sup>

It sounds like an oxymoron, a contradiction, doesn't it – that if we just fear God first, we need not be afraid of anything else. But it is the truth. Profoundly the truth – proven by faithful human experience again and again. Focus on God first – fear Him – and all our other fears shall be subdued and overcome. Presbyterian pastor Craig Barnes tells of watching the news coverage of the 1989 earthquake in San Francisco. That's been a long time ago, but I know many of you remember watching those scenes of utter devastation and loss. But Barnes says that one particular image from all that news coverage stood out to him. The camera, scanning over the rubble of a collapsed building, showed an open umbrella lying against the rubble.

At first, Barnes says, the image of that umbrella suggested the tragic story of someone who had set out for work that morning without a care in the world except that it might rain today. But then it dawned on him, he says, that one, there was no rain that day; and two, the umbrella was open, not closed. And that the most reasonable explanation of that fact was something speaking deeply to our human condition apart from the rightful and primary fear of God – that as the buildings, expressways, and bridges began tumbling down in the earthquake, the umbrella's owner had instinctively opened that flimsy nylon umbrella to protect himself or herself from the falling debris. And Barnes concludes with this thought: *"Sometimes, when the world shakes around us, life is so frightening that we'll do anything to give ourselves the illusion of security."*<sup>9</sup>

But, says Jesus, in fearing God first, before all our other fears – even our "world shaking around, life is so frightening" fears – our security becomes most definitely not an illusion. Not an illusion because it is anchored not in our strength, but in His divine strength operating through us and in our circumstances. Not in our power, but in His divine power to bring all things round to good in the end. Not in our optimism, but in His gift to us of never-failing hope – that assurance that because we belong to Him, because He has even counted the hairs on our heads, because we are so precious to Him – therefore, that nothing we fear in this life will ever prove mightier than His love for us, nor greater than His power to bring us safely through all that we fear. Come what may, He tells His disciples – and that may well include even persecution by the religious leadership for their faith in Him, as He warns them at the end of our passage – but even then, come what may, we belong to God and to His eternal Kingdom. And that, even if the worst were to happen to us here, there is already for us a place prepared in God's Heaven.<sup>10</sup> And so we need not be afraid. Fear God, and there is nothing more to fear.

Or, as the opening question of the Heidelberg Catechism puts it: *"What is your only comfort, in life and in death?"* The answer:

*That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.*

Fear God, and there is nothing more to be afraid of.

Gregory Jones, the Dean of the Duke Divinity School, tells of a conversation with a visiting scholar from the Democratic Republic of Congo. This man had started a Christian university in the Congo, which had quickly mushroomed to over eight hundred students. He spoke with great enthusiasm about the progress that was being made, and the good work being done for Christ by his graduates. Jones knew that this university was located very close to the center of an area of intense conflict and violence in that country, so at one point he asked his visitor if he had ever gotten discouraged in his work. The man said, *“Oh, I never get discouraged.”* But then he added:

*Yes, there was one time – when I was confronted by a 12-year-old with an AK-47. I don’t get too worried if I encounter an armed adult, because I can usually talk him out of whatever he’s planning to do. But with 12-year-olds it’s different. They will almost always kill you, because they think they have to obey orders. So I was discouraged.*

*But once I talked the boy out of killing me, I realized that there wasn’t any reason to be scared or discouraged. I just need to keep myself and my work focused on God. As long as I do that, I don’t get discouraged.<sup>11</sup>*

*“Keep myself and my work focused on God”* – meaning, fear Him first. *“As long as I do that, I don’t get discouraged.”* As long as I do that, I can live unafraid of what may be and of what has been.

*“But I will warn you whom to fear,”* says Jesus. *“Fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”* Because in fearing God first, we discover, and we become rooted, in the great truth that in God’s hands, we really have absolutely nothing to be afraid of. We are His, and He is ours, in all things, and forever.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:21-22, 44-45.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 11:37-54.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 9:23.

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 9:10, 15:33; Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10, et. al.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:38-39.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 31:15, 139:10; Isaiah 49:16; John 10:27-29, et. al.

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<sup>8</sup> Line from Civilla Durfee Martin's beloved hymn, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

<sup>9</sup> M. Craig Barnes, Yearning (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> John 14:2-3.

<sup>11</sup> L. Gregory Jones, "Boldly Humble," Christian Century, Vol. 126, No. 21 (October 20, 2009), p. 59.