
“Fearing the Wrong Things”

Luke 12:4-7

Pastor Peter Yi

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⁴“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. ⁵But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. ⁶Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. ⁷Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Today, we are beginning on a four-part sermon series on the subject of fear. Today is about misplaced fears or fearing the wrong the things. Next week we'll be looking at how it's actually irrational to live our lives with worry and anxiety. The week after that we'll be looking at the antidote for anxiety and finally, how we can live lives of strength and courage.

It goes without saying that many people have been struggling with fear for a large part of this year. Perhaps the fear we've been experiencing is justified. We are, after all, in the midst of a global pandemic, a crisis that occurs once a century. Sometimes our fears can be stoked by what we hear in the news. What are our politicians saying? What about the medical experts? And then what about the statistics? And how am I to properly interpret the statistics? And so on? Then as more research and more stats and more voices started to chime in, it appeared as if there were two schools of thought. One group, claiming science, said that this is indeed a very serious disease, that we should take extreme measures to deal with. The other group, also claiming science, said, this has been blown out of proportion. Now, I'm not here to tell you which side to be on. That's really not the point of this message. But this division causes confusion, and confusion can lead to even more fear.

Sometimes our fears are influenced by what the mob is doing. It wasn't but a few months ago when everyone went on a toilet paper rampage. There was chaos at the grocery stores. People were hoarding food and other so-called survival items. So, when we see in the news people going nuts over these things, for sure, it doesn't make us calmer, it makes us more anxious and nervous. We start thinking, maybe I should stock up on these things as well. Now, in hindsight, what does it say about a society that hoards toilet paper? It's saying that the worst thing that could happen, worse than not having food, worse than not having water, worse than not having clothing, worse than not having medicine, is to have to do my bathroom business and not have toilet paper. It's crazy. We're crazy!

However, fear is a real thing. We still fear catching the virus and getting sick. We're afraid of spreading it to others. What if our children get sick? And the biggest fear of all...what if I die? In addition to that, for many of us, because of this virus, which has resulted in this lockdown, have lost jobs. So, there's the fear of unemployment, not being able to find work again, not being able to pay the bills and provide for our families. Just consider the folks in the airline industry, which must be operating at just a fraction of what it was before the pandemic. What will happen to airport staff, flight attendants, mechanics, pilots, and all the other businesses that rely on people traveling?

Fear is a normal part of the human experience. Because we live in a world tainted by sin, we live in a world fraught with dangers, and those dangers lead to feelings of insecurity. There are disruptions or threats to our safety, and thus the fear. So many things can cause fear. War, violence, experiencing want or lack of a necessity, an unknown future, disease, hunger, going through a separation from a boyfriend or girlfriend, and even worse is to go through a divorce. Those are fearful things.

So that's enough of an introduction on the subject. Let's look to our Lord and see what he had to say about fear. Here's the context. In chapter 11, we find Jesus giving an extended criticism and rebuke of the religious leaders. In fact, these were words of serious judgment against their hypocrisy and false spirituality. That brings us to chapter 12. Let me begin with verse 1 and read up to verse 12, though the focus will be on verses 4-7:

⁴“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. ⁵But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. ⁶Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. ⁷Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

⁸“I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. ⁹But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God. ¹⁰And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

¹¹“When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, ¹²for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”

After Jesus rebuked of the religious leaders, we find Jesus amongst thousands of his followers. But instead of addressing the crowd, he takes a moment to speak to his disciples. It's interesting to see that Luke is making a distinction between the crowd and the disciples. There were thousands in the crowd, but perhaps only dozens or hundreds that were his disciples, literally his followers and what does he say to his disciples? He tells them to “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees. Be careful of their hypocrisy.” He had just finished condemning the Pharisees, and now he warns the disciples to be alert and discerning. Don't fall for what they are saying and teaching. You'll see that what they say and what they do are at odds. How come? Because they're hypocrites. And eventually hypocrites will be shown for what they truly are.

Then, in verse 4, Jesus tells his disciples, “I tell you my friends, do not to be afraid of those who can kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”

Jesus here is referring to the Pharisees first and foremost, but probably to others too, like the Roman government. The Pharisees, if you get out of their good graces; if you draw their attention; if you criticize them; or, perhaps you don't show up at their meetings, and the religious police show up at your door and start to interrogate you, drag you off to a court, judge you and then condemn you.

We know from what they ended up doing to Jesus, that they probably had their way to make your life miserable as well, perhaps even to end your life with a false accusation. So very likely, the people lived in fear of this State religion, with its hierarchy, and rules and punishments. They were told to follow, to shut up and obey, or face the consequences. They were living in fear. But here's this Jesus who doesn't live in fear. We know how people are in the presence of a threatening authority figure. Don't make eye contact. Don't draw attention to yourself. Don't speak. Try to be invisible, but Jesus isn't like that at all. He doesn't cower before these authorities. He doesn't live in hiding. He actually gets into their faces and he pronounces the judgment of God on them. He's saying to them, "You'll get yours!"

Then he tells his disciples. You don't need to fear them. He says that the worst thing they can do to you is to kill you. Think about it. Probably one of the worst things that could happen to a person is to be falsely accused, judged and condemned by an unjust and corrupt power. They come quietly in the middle of the night, but a bag over your head and take you away, to never be seen again. Jesus is saying that the worst thing they could do to you is lock you up. The worst thing they could do to you is put you on the blacklist, get you fired from your job, have some thugs come and destroy your home and property and sure, they can even kill you, but after that, they can do no more.

Isn't that a strange thing for Jesus to say? It doesn't sound very caring, very compassionate. It doesn't sound very tender, but, in fact, it's the most compassionate thing he could ever say. In saying this, he's telling us that we should not fear the things that can happen while we are alive, even something that can end our lives. Think about people in general and think about yourself. Where is the vast majority of our fears directed? We fear a difficult final exam. We fear not graduating. We fear not getting the job we wanted. We fear getting demoted. We fear getting fired. We fear not meeting the right person. We fear getting rejected. We fear never getting married. We fear not being able to have children. We fear our children might get sick. We fear our marriage won't last. We fear that we might get into a car accident. We fear that as a woman, that we might get sexually assaulted. We fear that our stocks and investments might crash. We fear we won't have enough saved for retirement. We fear we might get cancer. We fear we might not survive cancer. We fear getting Covid-19. We fear we might get really sick and we fear we might die.

If we're honest with ourselves, 90-99% of our fears have to do with things that happen or could happen while we are alive.

And what does gentle Jesus say to that? He says, "That, my friends, is misplaced fear." Is he being clear here? Is it possible that we're misunderstanding what he's saying? He says, one of the worst things that can happen to you is to be falsely accused and then convicted and then executed. "Do not be afraid of those wicked people who can bring your life to an end." Why is that misplaced fear? I think every single one of us would be shaking in our boots if that were to happen. Literally everything would be taken away from us.

Our family, our property, our job, our freedom, our lives. And Jesus, you have the nerve to tell us not to fear?

He tells us in what he says next what it is that we should fear. Listen. Jesus says, “But I will show you (or inform you) whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.” So, what is it that we must fear? It’s God. That seems a bit odd doesn’t it? Let me give you a few reasons why we should fear God and not the things that we can experience while we’re living.

The First reason we should fear God is because he can harm you even after you’re dead. That’s crazy power, which should elicit crazy fear.

We know that human beings can cause us great harm while we are alive. *One example is from a biography I read a few years ago. Louis Zamperini was an American World War II veteran. During the war his plane was shot down in the Pacific. He survived for weeks on a rubber raft, before eventually reaching land, on a Japanese occupied territory. He was captured and put into a Japanese prison camp. One of the prison guards, nicknamed “The Bird”, after finding out the Louis was a former Olympic athlete, had it in for him. He wanted to destroy him and humiliate him. For years, until his release, “he Bird” did terrible and unspeakable tortures to Louis. You can read about it in his biography, “Unbroken.”*

After the war was over, he was rescued from the prison camp, he returned back to California, got married and tried to get on with life. But he couldn’t escape the memories of what had happened to him in the prison camp, and all the awful things “The Bird” had done to him. One night while he was sleeping, he had another terrible nightmare, and in the dream, there he was in the prison camp, and there was his nemesis, “The Bird.” When he woke up from his nightmare, his wife was screaming, as he was on top of her, strangling her neck.

Think about what he went through. He went through terrible torture by “The Bird” and “The Bird” continued to haunt him in his dreams, even after the war was over, but after Louis died (and he died just a few years ago), there was nothing more “The Bird” could do to him, but God, and only God, can harm us, even after we die and for that reason, we should fear him.

The second reason we should fear God is because God has the power and the right, the justification, to cause even greater harm than any puny, finite human can cause. That harm is called **hell**. No suffering, no pain—emotional, psychological or physical, can compare to the sufferings a person will experience if he goes to hell. How does the Bible describe hell? Jesus describes it as “the fire of hell” and “the unquenchable fire.” It’s the place “where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” He calls it a “place of torment.” He also refers to it as “darkness.” It’s a place where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” These are all descriptions of how awful and terrible and painful hell will be for those who go there. In fact, our language falls short of describing how awful it really will be. Hell cannot even be compared to anything we experience here on earth. *If you’re walking down the sidewalk and there in front of you is a little teacup poodle. A tiny little dog that can fit in the palm of your hand. And then right behind that little poodle is an 40kg pit bull, running toward you. Is it rational to fear the poodle more than the pitbull?* In the same way, does it make sense that we fear a person who can end my physical life, as awful as that is, but not fear the one who can end my soul? We must fear God because He alone has the ability and right to send us to hell.

The third reason we should fear God is because the hell to which he can send us for eternity. Jesus said about hell, “it’s the place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. Revelation 20:10 says, “They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” What we experience here, no matter how difficult, pales in comparison to the severity and eternity of hell.

I had said earlier that over 90% of our fears are misplaced and misdirected to things that happen during our lives. Now that we know what we know, shouldn’t over 90% of our fears be directed, not to what happens on this earth, while we are alive, but on what happens after we die.

Now, this isn’t the end of the story, this isn’t the end of the teaching. Look at what Jesus says next.

⁶ Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. ⁷ Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

What is he saying? What’s this thing about sparrows? It’s similar to what he said in his famous Sermon on the Mount, which is the passage for next week. But let me just reference it for a moment. He said in the section about worry, “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” In saying, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?”, He’s saying look at how un-valuable these birds are. You can buy five of them for two pennies. These are the birds you find on the bargain shelf of the grocery store. Yet even those insignificant birds are not forgotten by God. Surely, you are more valuable than birds, than these sparrows. In fact, even the very hairs on your head are numbered—meaning that God cares for you, he knows you, nothing goes unnoticed by Him. You are precious to Him.

If you are God’s child, then you have nothing to be afraid of, not in this life for starters, and even better, you have nothing to fear in the life to come. God is not your enemy, God is your friend, who will rescue you from his judgment, from hell, and bring you to his eternal heaven. Even if you do die, you will live, and that forever.

How about you? Are you overcome with fear? Or maybe you don’t fear all that much in this world at all. That too can be misplaced fear, if you don’t fear God and what he can and will do to you after you die. Let me explain. God created you, not for you first and foremost, but for himself. He created you to be in a relationship with him, to know him, obey him, to live life with him as your center. And God gave you laws by which he wants you to live. Those laws are not only written in the Bible, but they’re also written on each person’s heart. But each person chooses to disobey God, which is called sin. What is it that we do when we sin against God? A person kicks God out of their center and they replace God with self. You want to live by your rules, your way, and for yourself, and Not for God.

And because God is just, he cannot allow your sin or my sin to go unpunished. The Bible says that “the wages of sin, that is the reward for sin, the consequences for sin, is death, and that death is what we’ve been talking about; that death is an eternity in hell.” God will justly judge you for your sins, but God made a way for you and me, to have our sins taken care of, to be forgiven.

God sent his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place, receiving upon himself, the penalty for sin, that we should have received. If we accept the gift of Jesus' life and death and resurrection, by faith, by believing that this is so, then we will be forgiven, and we will be saved. Saved from what? Saved from hell. Saved from God's wrath and punishment. Saved from a life of self-destruction. Instead of getting all those things, we will be received as his friends, and even more than friends, we will be accepted as his children, forever.

But there's a word for Christians too and that's found in verse 8-12:

⁸ "I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. ⁹ But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God. ¹⁰ And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

¹¹ "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, ¹² for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."

He's saying that if you know that you are a friend of Jesus Christ, and if you know that after you die, you have absolutely nothing and no one to fear, then how should you live while you still live? In fear? No! Never. Rather, be bold. Be courageous. Don't fear men, don't fear the rejection of men. Don't fear the condemnation of men. Don't fear the persecution of men. Don't fear sickness, don't fear disease, don't fear anything that this world might bring. Instead, be bold, be courageous for Jesus. Confidently proclaim the name of Jesus. Radically serve others. We can live as he commands us to live. We can speak his Gospel, for the Holy Spirit will indwell you, God himself will indwell you to speak the truth.

Friends, don't live in fear any longer. You have nothing to fear in this life. You have nothing to fear in the next life. Live for Jesus and for his Gospel.

Let's pray.