

## Prayers

### To God

*Look at the things that surround you, and offer your thanks to God for the extraordinary power of His love for you.*

### For myself

*Pray about your daily work*

*Pray about your future and especially your future employment. It may seem that you know how the future will work out, but still, offer this to the Lord and submit to His guidance.*

### For others

Lord Jesus Christ, the world is full of many people and I cannot know them all. You know them, however, and You can guide them as individuals and as nations. Send Your Holy Spirit on this world to guide people towards Your truth and light, so that our world may be saved from the dreadful consequences of evil and dishonesty, which make life today so hard for so many. I ask this in Your name, Lord Jesus Christ:  
**AMEN**

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## Meditation

*(a reflection based on Romans 5:1-5)*

Brother, sister, and all you of faith; Peace.  
May peace be yours, by faith and the Spirit.

Peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,  
An open pathway to the grace that is ours.

Peace to share in the hope of God's glory,  
And make sense of everything in Christ.

Peace, for in Him all things work together for good;  
Suffering, endurance, good character, and hope.

Peace, because our hope will never disappoint  
For His love has already been poured upon us.

Peace which comes from the blessing of God,  
And His Spirit, which gives us new life!

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## Bible Passage

### Luke 12:1-12

<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, a crowd of such large numbers had gathered that they were crushing against each other. Jesus however began to speak first to his disciples, with these words:

***“Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. <sup>2</sup> Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden, which will not be made known. <sup>3</sup> So, what you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the rooftops.***

***<sup>4</sup> “I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. <sup>5</sup> But I will point out to you whom to fear; fear him who kills and afterwards has the power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.***

***<sup>6</sup> “Are not five sparrows sold for two small coins? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. <sup>7</sup> Why, the very hairs of your head are all numbered! Fear not; you are worth more than many sparrows.***

***<sup>8</sup> “I say to all you who make me known before others, the Son of Man will also make you known before the angels of God; <sup>9</sup> but those who disown me before others will be disowned before the angels of God. <sup>10</sup> Moreover, everyone who says something against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but there is no forgiveness for those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit.***

***<sup>11</sup> “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how to defend yourselves or what you should say, <sup>12</sup> for at that very moment the Holy Spirit will instruct you what to say.”***

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## Review

After a tense and difficult argument with Pharisees and lawyers at a meal (11:37-54), Jesus turned to the disciples. They had heard what Jesus had said, and realised the stakes were rising sharply. It was one thing to follow their dynamic leader as He preached and healed to popular acclaim; it was quite another to get drawn into confrontation with those who ruled Judea and could make their lives very uncomfortable. Jesus knew what the disciples were thinking, and despite the growing size of the crowds, described as, ‘*crushing against each other*’ (12:1), he sought to both warn the disciples about the dangers of Pharisaism and reassure them of God’s compassion and help. The five paragraphs of Jesus’ advice in our reading today offer just this.

Jesus starts by outlining the dangers of Pharisaism. Yesterday and the day before, we read about His denunciation of the religious leaders and theologians of His day, and if we find it stunning now, the disciples were surely astonished. Jesus had destroyed the spiritual logic and arguments of people they had previously believed were the most godly of Jews (11:37-54); He told them they had forgotten God’s heart of love and justice (11:42). No wonder then that Jesus turned to the disciples to warn them about the sin of hypocrisy which was endemic amongst the Pharisees (12:2f.).

It is interesting therefore that having summarised His attack against the Pharisees (12:1), Jesus speaks of them no more at this time. In verses 2 and 3, He explains the spiritual reason why hypocrisy can never fool God even though it fools people. The limitations of human life mean that no one can know everything about others, so while some things are hidden others are exposed, and even if the reasons for this are locked within our past, we mostly choose what to let others know about us and what to hold back. Hypocrisy feeds off this human limitation by saying one thing and doing another. However, it is different with God, for before His gaze there are no secrets. Moreover, at a time of His choice all things will be exposed, even the most secret of thoughts (12:3). This is a deeply challenging word, and one that people rarely grasp, for if we did we would surely not keep within ourselves as much anger, un-forgiveness, negativity and hard heartedness (and more) as we do. Jesus says that God will expose it all.

This is a tough call for us, as well as the first disciples. But Jesus did not want to scare the disciples, He wanted them to understand that just like everyone, the Pharisees would stand before their Maker and Judge. He knew that this might create fear in some people, so Jesus immediately changed tack, to offer the disciples some reassurance. He insists they should not fear God's judgement, rather, they should fear the enemy who has the power to '*throw you into hell*' (12:5). This is one of several New Testament texts that speak of 'hell', the 'place of the dead' where there is no access to God, but we must focus on this verse. God does not condemn people to hell; this is done by '*him who kills*', meaning the devil. It is he who promotes the sins that separate people from God, in order to destroy humanity.

This message must be received with care if we are to find the inherent comfort it offers God's faithful. So Jesus continues with one of those memorable and poignant sayings that stir the soul. We can imagine Jesus looking around at sparrows flitting around his feet and pecking at the rich insect life around the edge of the pathways. They are the perfect example of God's meticulous care and attention to detail, and Jesus says, '*not one of them is forgotten by God*' (12:6). Then, with perhaps more mirth than we imagine, especially if one or more of the disciples was bald (as was likely), He adds, '*even the hairs of your head are all numbered!*' (12:7). Jesus wanted all His followers to know two things; each individual is highly valued by God, and His love has no blind spots.

It is in this setting that Luke reports Jesus making a clear distinction between those who benefit from God's gracious love and those who cannot. He defines this on the basis of human deeds that arise from what they believe about Him; those who both believe Jesus is the '*Son of Man*' and say so (12:8), are welcomed by God, but those who will have nothing to do with Him and say so, thereby preclude themselves from God's affection (12:9).

Verse 10, which follows this teaching has proved to be controversial. But this is because it is easy to misunderstand what is in truth a simple point. Jesus has presented a picture of God as longing to receive the praises of His people and the testimony they bear of His Son Jesus. He is willing to forgive those who turn to Him in faith, but there is one sin that cannot be forgiven; the '*unforgiveable sin*'. We should not speculate about this sin because Jesus tells us exactly that this sin is to '*blaspheme against the Holy Spirit*' (12:10). To blaspheme means to curse and deny something that is of God; so to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit means to deny that the Holy Spirit is God and curse both the Holy Spirit and therefore God Himself. Let us not try to argue that this could mean anything else, for surely, those who do this want nothing to do with God and have sealed their own fate. The '*unforgiveable sin*' is not and has never been a mere fault of human nature.

In the last two verses, Jesus turns things around again, for those who believe in Him are people through whom the Holy Spirit is indeed at work. His aim remains to encourage His disciples, and He addresses the fears of those around Him who might fear that by confronting the Pharisees, they will themselves be hauled before the Council of Judaism, the Sanhedrin, on charges of blasphemy. In such critical moments, Jesus assures His disciples, the Holy

Spirit will work supremely to give them a godly defence against hypocritical legalism at its worst. In saying this, Jesus was giving more than advice, He was also prophesying what would happen to Him (and the apostles) when hauled before the Sanhedrin.

There are many perils in this world, but the disciple of Christ may rest assured that God has provided the Holy Spirit as a personal support. If the heart is full of faith and focussed on Jesus, then truth and justice will prevail.

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## Going Deeper

### **Notes on the text and translation**

#### **V1 ‘crushing against each other’**

Other translations:

‘trampling on one another’ (NIV)

‘treading on one another’ (NJB)

I have used the phrase ‘*crushing against each other*’ because the Greek word does not necessarily mean ‘*trampling*’. It is a word that can also be used more figuratively to indicate general disregard for the comforts of others. I therefore reckon Luke was reporting what we might call the dangerous crush of large numbers rather than the dire state of people being trampled upon.

#### **V3 ‘what you have whispered behind closed doors’**

Other translations:

‘what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms’ (NIV)

‘whatever you have whispered in the rooms deep inside the house’ (CEB)

The Greek phrase I have translated as ‘*whispered*’ is literally ‘speak in the ear’, and my phrase ‘*behind closed doors*’ translates the Greek word ‘inner storehouse’. When put together, I do not believe it is necessary to use anything other than the obvious expression ‘*whispered behind closed doors*’. The attempts by other Bible versions to be more literal in translation make Jesus’ words seem rather obscure to us now.

#### **V8 ‘all you who make me known before others’**

Other translations:

‘whoever acknowledges me before men’ (NIV)

‘if anyone openly declares me before others’ (NRSV)

The central word in this phrase is often translated ‘*acknowledge*’ (NIV), but it is difficult to be clear about what this means, and we need to tie down what this means. The Greek word here is however very specific. It means ‘confess’, in the sense of accepting something and declaring it. For example, we might say today that we ‘confess’ the faith (when, all too often, we think of the word ‘confess’ as being negative and associated exclusively with sin). So Jesus is speaking here of those who agree with others and with God that Jesus is the Messiah, and say so. Hence my translation.

## **VZ    *'blaspheme'***

Every translation uses this word and this is reasonable for no other English word will do. It is worth noting however that in ancient Greek, the word has these meanings: to slander or defame someone's reputation, to revile people of faith, to insult or speak evil about someone or the faith, to deny the Gospel message, or to reject or defame God. It is not a word to be used lightly.

## ***Further Comments***

### ***The leaven of the Pharisees (12:1)***

The word 'leaven' refers to what we call 'yeast'. In the Bible, the idea of yeast growing silently within the bread before it is cooked is used both positively and negatively. When the people of Israel left Egypt, they were required by God to leave all the leaven behind, as a sign of leaving behind the stability of settled lifestyle as well as slavery in Egypt. Jesus however uses the image more positively, describing the Kingdom of God as growing like 'leaven' (Matthew 13:33f. Luke 13:21f.). Paul calls for the abandoning of 'old yeast' and starting afresh with new (1 Cor 5:6f. Galatians 5:9).

All this should warn us not to assume that the picture of 'leaven' or 'yeast' is always negative. It simply refers to the idea of things growing secretly within people, such as attitudes, practices, traditions and the like. In this sense it is an idea that Jesus picks up on as He talks about things being brought to light before God (12:3).

### ***'Friends' (12:4)***

It is remarkable that Jesus calls His disciples 'friends'. He does this only rarely, here in Luke's Gospel and in John (15:13f.). In these two powerful passages, Jesus draws close to the disciples and shows that it is God's purpose to have an intimate relationship with those who come to Him and answer His call.

### ***'Hell' (12:5)***

The picture of 'hell' conjured by the Greek word used here is relatively simple to explain. The word is 'Gehenna', which is a derivation of the name of the valley in Jerusalem to the south and west of the city, the valley of 'ge-hinnon'. In ancient times it had been used for idolatrous practices by the apostate Kings of Judah (2 Chron 28:3, 33:6), but King Josiah turned it into a rubbish dump, where '*worm never dies and the fire is never quenched*' (Mark 9:48). The valley came to symbolise eternal punishment, and the continual fire there became a picture of God's final judgement and punishment of all evil.

### ***'Me' and the 'Son of Man' (12:8)***

In verse 8, Jesus refers to Himself as 'me' and then almost immediately as the 'Son of Man'. Why does He do this? It is likely that Jesus saw the title as a Messianic title that He would receive in glory at the Last Judgement; He uses it when speaking about the End Times (12:8). This could well explain why Jesus seems to be reluctant to accept titles in His lifetime; He never tells people that He is 'X' or He is 'Y', He always encourages people to discover for themselves who He is. He is also content to know that he will receive all glory when He returns to the Father.

### ***'Rulers and authorities' (12:11)***

Whilst the meaning of verse 11 is relatively secure (see review), it is odd that Luke uses the expression 'rulers and authorities'. It is not used anywhere else in the Gospel or on the lips of Jesus; it is familiar to us from the letters of Paul, where he speaks about Gentile powers and authorities, sometimes in a derogatory manner. Some think that Luke transported this

phrase from the time of the early church back into his Gospel. Others think that the phrase came from Jesus and was taken up by Paul in later years.

With all this in mind, we can look at this great text and realise that whilst it was Jesus Himself who appeared before the Jewish authorities as he went to His death, later leaders of the Christian church had to stand before Roman and pagan authorities. Perhaps Jesus understood this better than we realise.

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## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***Revealing what is hidden***

There are many religious societies that specialise in secrets; beware of them. The Christian faith is always open, and needs to be seen to be so. Secrecy can sometimes be the unfortunate result of human weakness, especially when leaders or servants of the church are not good at basic communication. For example, many a church has abandoned having 'meetings' because people are not willing to give time to dealing with matters in this way, but the result can be that a church becomes a slave to its leaders, whose decisions are never debated or fully understood by those who are most affected by them.

God's church should always look to be transparent in its operation so that there is no hint of secrecy about its message or how it operates. If people think of the church as holding back secrets, about money, about God, about people and more, then it will always be viewed with suspicion. The Gospel is first and foremost freely available.

#### ***Him who kills***

Many people regard the devil or Satan as just a way of talking about evil. Jesus is far more specific. He urges those around Him to '*fear him who kills and afterwards has the power to throw you into hell*' (12:5). In other words, we should fear the devil's power to tempt us away from God and consign us to a future that is the opposite of joy in the presence of the Father. We must examine the rest of Scripture to understand more about the power of temptation, but Jesus Himself had to struggle against it (Matthew 4:1f., Luke 4:1f.), so the devil's power in this life is not something to ignore.

How then can we apply Jesus' advice? We should remain vigilant for anything that draws us away from God and from the fellowship of believers. It sounds simple enough, but for many it is very hard, and we should perhaps help one another. One of the principle things to pull people away from faith is tragedy and loss, and so it is imperative that when people suffer in this way, the church should rally around and offer help and support.

#### ***Avoiding the sin against the Holy Spirit***

It seems to me that the best way to make sure that we do not sin against the Holy Spirit is to welcome the Holy Spirit at all times into our lives. Again, this sounds simple enough, but in the midst of daily life, it is all too easy to become engrossed in worldliness and forget that God is always at hand waiting to partner us in what we do. The more we consciously pray to God in the midst of life, and the more we call on the help of the Spirit, the more we will protect ourselves from inadvertent sin and the power of the tempter.

## ***Ideas for what to do***

- Reflect on the words of Jesus in verses 2 and 3. Is there anything you have hidden away in your soul that you may find embarrassing when Christ reveals them? This is a serious matter, but one that can only be dealt with personally; though I suggest that they are best dealt with using help from other people who you trust. However hard you find it, confession before others and the support of their prayers is key to dealing with personal issues
- To what extent are you confident that the Holy Spirit has permission to work within you? Pray about this and ask the Lord to help you as you examine yourself before Him.

## ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. What are the sharp messages about faith to be found within this passage?
2. What comfort can you find within the words of Jesus in this passage of Scripture?
3. Why are people concerned about the 'unforgiveable sin' and the '*sin against the Holy Spirit*'? What does this mean to you and what does it mean for the church?

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## **Final Prayer**

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for helping me throughout my life. You have told me hard things when I needed to hear them, and You have also been gentle and kind to me when I have needed this most. My Saviour, I am truly grateful; You are the true governor of my life.  
AMEN

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