

# **To Seek and To Save the Lost**

## **Beware of the Leaven of the Pharisees**

*Luke 12:1-3*

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# Beware of the Leaven of the Pharisees

## Scripture

Jesus had completed his ministry in Galilee and was on his way to Jerusalem during the final few months of his life before his crucifixion. During this time Jesus gave his followers some very important teaching regarding discipleship. Commentator William Barclay says, “When we read [Luke 12] we are reminded again of the Jewish definition of preaching – a Charaz, which means *stringing pearls*. This passage, too, is a collection of pearls strung together without the close connection which modern preaching demands. But in it there are certain dominant ideas.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus’ unifying theme was to call his disciples to trust God at all times, regardless of circumstances.

Let’s read about Jesus’ warning about the leaven of the Pharisees in Luke 12:1-3:

**<sup>1</sup>In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. <sup>2</sup>Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. <sup>3</sup>Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops. (Luke 12:1-3)**

## Introduction

A beach near Perranporth, Cornwall (in Great Britain) is unlike any other stretch of coast in the world. It is not known

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 190.

for its breakers or sand, but for what washes up in the surf: Tens of thousands of toy Lego bricks.

Back in 1997, a wave hit a container ship called the Tokio Express, which had 62 containers on board. The ship sank, and as a result all 62 containers onboard the ship went overboard, and sank to the bottom of the ocean. One of those containers had nearly 4.8 million pieces of Lego bound for New York.

No one knows exactly what happened next, or even what was in the other 61 containers, but Lego pieces – and only Lego pieces – started washing up on both the north and south beaches of Cornwall. And in a quirky twist, many of the Lego items were nautical-themed, so locals and tourists alike have found miniature cutlasses, flippers, spear guns, sea grass, and scuba gear.

A U.S. oceanographer named Curtis Ebbesmeyer, who studies ocean currents and has been studying the story of the Lego pieces on the coast of Cornwall, offered a simple lesson. He said,

The most profound lesson I've learned from the Lego story is that things that go to the bottom of the sea don't always stay there. . . . They can be carried around the world, seemingly randomly, but subject to the planet's currents and tides. The incident is a perfect example of how even when inside a steel container, sunken items don't stay sunken.<sup>2</sup>

Certain things in our spiritual lives – especially our sins – don't stay sunken forever. Like the Lego pieces, these spiritual realities will eventually rise to the surface. The question is what we will do when we come across signs of them in our lives, sticking up out of the sand?

Jesus routinely exposed sin in people's lives. He even exposed hypocrisy in the lives of the Pharisees, the religious

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28367198>.

leaders of his day. Jesus had just had dinner at the home of a Pharisee and pronounced woes upon the Pharisees and lawyers. Jesus' pronouncement made the Pharisees and lawyers so angry that they wanted to catch him in some mistake so that they could kill him. This is the context for Jesus' warning about spiritual hypocrisy.

## Lesson

The analysis of the concept of hypocrisy as set forth in Luke 12:1-3 warns us that spiritual hypocrisy is a sin that will be exposed.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Example of Hypocrisy (12:1)
2. The Exposure of Hypocrisy (12:2-3)

### I. The Example of Hypocrisy (12:1)

First, let's look at the example of hypocrisy.

Luke said in verse 1 that **in the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another**, Jesus began to say to his disciples first, **"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."**

I find it astonishing that **many thousands of people** came to Jesus. I assume that some wanted to hear his teaching and others wanted to see him do some miracle. Nevertheless, there were so many people that **they were trampling one another** in their effort to see and hear Jesus.

In the midst of this mob scene Jesus first addressed his own disciples. A little later in chapter 12 Jesus addressed the crowds. But, **first** he spoke to his own disciples.

Jesus told his disciples to **beware of the leaven of the Pharisees**. You probably know that **leaven** is yeast. It works

its way throughout the whole batch of dough. It is **leaven** (or yeast) that causes bread to rise. It describes something small that spreads silently, almost secretly, but ultimately pervasively. Sometimes the Bible uses **leaven** in a positive way, like the kingdom of God, for example (Luke 13:20-21). However, **leaven** is more often used in a negative sense in the Bible, and it often refers to sin. In this instance, in verse 1, Jesus used **leaven** to refer to the sin of hypocrisy.

The Greek word for **hypocrisy** (*hypokrisis*) was borrowed from the ancient theatre. In the Greek world, a hypocrite was an actor. He wore a mask and performed a role that did not correspond to his real self. Sometimes he even changed masks to depict two different characters. So, Jesus was saying that Pharisees were play actors or role players, wearing an outward mask of righteousness, but their hearts were far from God. The Pharisees were play actors of religion, pretending to be something that they were not.

We need to beware of the same danger. It is so easy to say and do things that make us seem more spiritual than we really are. We may give people the impression that we are really rather righteous when in fact our hearts are far from God. And rarely does anyone challenge us regarding our hypocrisy.

Craig Brian Larson, editor of PreachingToday.com, told the following story:

The Do-Not-Call list does a pretty good job of preventing unwanted telemarketing calls, but recently a rogue company somehow pierced my Do-Not-Call defenses and bombed my telephone with calls for several days.

The blitz of calls began one day when I picked up the ringing phone and heard a friendly voice say, "Hello, this is Scott." At first I couldn't even tell it was a recorded message; I almost said hello back before the recording continued, "Are you in debt? Are you being hounded by creditors?"

No, I'm not in debt, other than my mortgage, and I'm cur-

rent with that! I'd heard enough, and so I hung up, a little perturbed that I had been called by an unwanted machine.

A few hours later, the phone rang, I answered it, and a friendly voice said, "Hello, this is Scott." Goodbye, Scott.

More calls came, but I didn't do anything about it, hoping the bomber would give up. Finally, a few days later, I wrote the number down and mentioned it to my wife. I asked her to notify the Do-Not-Call agency the next day while I was at work. She said she had also been receiving numerous unwanted calls from "Scott." She suggested that if he called again that night that I stay on the line and wait for a real person.

Yep, another call came that night, using a different phone number but beginning with the same greeting, "Hello, this is Scott." I waited for the recording to end. Eventually a woman came on. "Hello," she said, "How can I help you?"

"First," I answered kindly, "may I have your name?"

Click. No response. She was gone. The call was over.<sup>3</sup>

When people do something and do not want to give their name, that is a bad sign. It usually means that they are trying to hide something and want to avoid accountability.

Are you doing anything or saying anything or thinking anything or watching anything with which you would rather not have your name associated? Bishop J. C. Ryle once described Pharisaism as "a leaven which once received into the heart infects the whole character of a man's Christianity."<sup>4</sup>

Is there any area in your life where you are play-acting? Are you able to see any hypocrisy in your life?

Let us beware of the leaven of hypocrisy.

## II. The Exposure of Hypocrisy (12:2-3)

And second, let's examine the exposure of hypocrisy.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/january/6011810.html>.

<sup>4</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 58.

Jesus went on to say to his disciples that a day is coming when the real condition of our hearts will be fully exposed. All of our thoughts will be exposed. All of our secret attitudes will be exposed. And all of our secret sins will be exposed. And they won't be exposed in a private meeting between you and God. No. They will be exposed for all to see. Jesus said in verses 2-3, **“Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.”**

We become so easily entangled in sin. One reason is that we enjoy sin; that is why we do it. But the more we do it, the greater our hypocrisy becomes as we try to hide it.

Pastor and author Max Lucado illustrates this truth in his book called *Grace*. He writes:

Ever since my high school buddy and I drank ourselves sick with a case of quarts, I have liked beer. . . . Out of the keg, tap, bottle, or frosty mug – it doesn't matter to me. I like it.

[But I also know that] alcoholism haunts my family ancestry. I have early memories of following my father through the halls of a rehab center to see his sister. Similar scenes repeated themselves with other relatives for decades. Beer doesn't mix well with my family DNA. So at the age of twenty-one, I swore off it. . . .

Then a few years back something resurrected my cravings. . . . At some point I reached for a can of brew instead of a can of soda, and as quick as you can pop the top, I was a beer fan again. A once-in-a-while. . . then once-a-week. . . then once-a-day beer fan.

I kept my preference to myself. No beer at home, lest my daughters think less of me. No beer in public. Who knows who might see me? None at home, none in public leaves only one option: convenience-store parking lots. For about a week I was that guy in the car, drinking out of the brown paper bag.

No, I don't know what resurrected my cravings, but I re-

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member what stunted them. En route to speak at a men's retreat, I stopped for my daily purchase. I walked out of the convenience store with a beer pressed against my side, scurried to my car for fear of being seen, opened the door, climbed in, and opened the can.

Then it dawned on me. I had become the very thing I hate: a hypocrite. A pretender. Two-faced. Acting one way. Living another. I had written sermons about people like me – Christians who care more about appearance than integrity. It wasn't the beer but the cover-up that nauseated me.<sup>5</sup>

Max Lucado realized that he had become a hypocrite. As he said, it wasn't the beer that was the problem. It was that he had play-acted that he never drank alcohol when in fact he was sneaking cans of beer in a convenience store parking lot. That was hypocrisy.

So, what did he do? Here's Lucado in his own words:

[So what] happened with my hypocrisy? First I threw the can of beer in the trash. Next I sat in the car for a long time, praying. Then I scheduled a visit with our church elders. I didn't embellish or downplay my actions; I just confessed them. And they, in turn, pronounced forgiveness over me. Jim Potts, a dear, silver-haired saint, reached across the table and put his hand on my shoulder and said something like this: "What you did was wrong. But what you are doing tonight is right. God's love is great enough to cover your sin. Trust his grace."

After talking to the elders, I spoke to the church. At our midweek gathering I once again told the story. I apologized for my duplicity and requested the prayers of the congregation. What followed was a refreshing hour of confession in which other people did the same. The church was strengthened, not weakened, by our honesty.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Max Lucado, *Grace* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 89-90.

<sup>6</sup> Max Lucado, *Grace*, 90-91.



What is your secret sin? When will it be exposed?

If it is not exposed in this life, you may be certain it will be exposed at the final judgment.

If you do not confess your sins, including the ones you think that no-one else knows about, then you will live your life in fear of being discovered. The only way to live unafraid and unashamed is to make a full confession, believing that God will forgive you all your sins through Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of hypocrisy as set forth in Luke 12:1-3, we should avoid play-acting and live before God and people with sincerity and truth.

How would your behavior change if you thought someone was watching you?

Two recent studies suggest that you might start acting more honestly. A 2006 study at a university faculty lounge offered coffee and tea to professors that for years had used an unsupervised honor system. The rules were clear: serve yourself and then put the money you owed into a box. For ten weeks, though, the experimenters put a hard-to-miss poster near the box. One version of the poster featured pretty flowers; the other version had a pair of eyes glaring out at the viewer. The image alternated between flowers and eyes each week. People paid almost three times more on “eyes” weeks than on “flowers” weeks.

A 2012 study found the same results – only this time watching eyes changed the behavior of potential bicycle thieves. Researchers put signs with a large pair of menacing eyes and the message “Cycle thieves: we are watching you” by the bike racks at Newcastle University in England. They then monitored bike thefts for two years and found a 62 percent drop in thefts at locations with the signs.

But there was an interesting twist to this experiment. While theft rates went down 62 percent in the “we are watching you” racks, in other places in the university it *shot up* by 65 percent – an almost perfect offset. In other words, the thieves kept stealing bikes; they just went down the street to get away from those eyeballs of judgment and accountability.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, God is watching you and me. He sees everything that you and I do in secret. Nothing escapes his eye.

You may have some secret sin. You may know that you are hypocrite. You know that you are a play actor. You act one way with people, even your Christian brothers and sisters, but your heart is far from right with God.

So, what should you do?

Well, I have good news for you! There is no sin that is beyond the forgiveness of God. So, confess your sin to God. And, if your sin involves other people, confess your sin to them as well. Then, believe that God sent Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for your sin.

When you repent of your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you shall receive the forgiveness of God. Then commit yourself to live before God and people with sincerity and truth. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Priceonomics blog, “How Honest Are You When No One Is Watching You?” (1-30-2014); John Metcalfe, “Posters of Angry Eyes Actually Scare Off Bike Thieves,” *The Atlantic* (4-29-2013).

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp)
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/source\\_detail.asp?sourceid=FredFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=FredFritz)

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**PRAYER:**

O Lord our God, Jesus warned us that spiritual hypocrisy is a sin that will be exposed. It may be exposed in our lifetime. But, if it is not exposed in our lifetime, it definitely will be exposed at the final judgment.

Help us to repent of our hypocrisy. Help us to believe that Jesus paid the penalty for all our sin, including our hypocrisy. Enable us then to live before you and all people a life of sincerity and truth.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!