

A "Chain" that Changes Us

(The Gospel According to Luke, Part III)

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Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

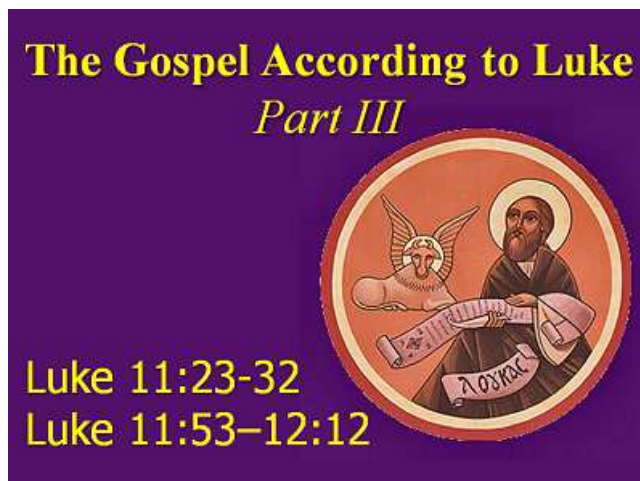
Luke 11:23-32 ESV

"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first."

As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, "This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."



Luke 11:53–12:12 ESV

. . . The scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, 54 lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.

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. 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.

"I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. 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 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.

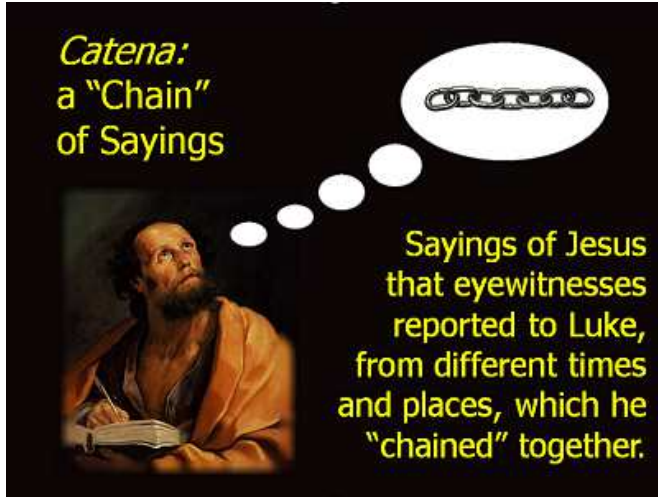
"And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. 1And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

In our Lenten journey through the Gospel According to Luke, we're able only to sample the extensive material that he researched for inclusion in his narrative. The next two Sundays we'll be looking at several of the parables of Jesus: those that tell of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the "prodigal son," the unjust judge, the Pharisee and the publican. But before we get to those familiar passages, we'll dip into some of the material in the intervening chapters. To select this material I checked into a book entitled *Gospel Parallels*, which prints the corresponding passages from all four Gospels side by side and allows you to compare them with each

other. Using this book I was able to select material that's peculiar to Luke's Gospel, or which is found in other Gospels as well but which Luke presents in his own special way. In our sampling we could have chosen a good number of different passages, so in a way our selection is arbitrary, but today we're going to look at parts of chapter 11 and chapter 12.

We begin with that interesting passage that begins at chapter 11, verse 23, recording various sayings of Jesus. As we read through this material we might find it hard to see the connection between the different sayings. And there might not be much of a connection, because Luke wasn't one of the disciples who traveled with Jesus. In fact, Luke might not even have been Jewish. He has a Greek name, but many Jews in the Roman world had both Jewish and Greek names, like Paul whose Jewish name was Saul. So we really can't tell.



In any case, Luke is writing a generation after Jesus said these things, and he has to rely on what his sources have told him. The people who reported to Luke may well have remembered what Jesus said, but might not have remembered when and where he said it. So Luke has no choice, in collecting this material, but to string these words of Jesus together in what scholars call a *catena*, or chain of sayings that may not have originally been uttered on the same occasion. That means that when we teach from these chapters in Luke we don't

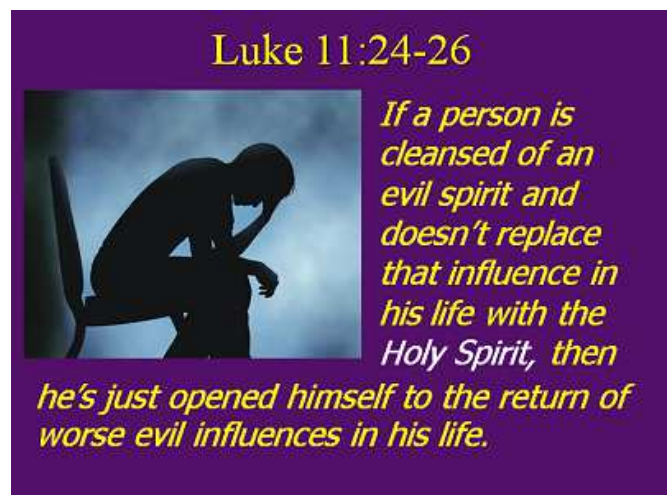
have any neat, connected teaching outline. In most cases we just have to take each statement as it comes, without much of a context.

Take that first statement in chapter 11, verse 23, for example: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." This doesn't seem to be connected with what came before in Luke's narrative, nor with what follows. But it's a memorable saying, isn't it? Jesus seems to be saying that if you're not on board with the message of the coming of God's kingdom, then you're really working against it. In the Jewish context of Galilee and Judea, if you're not helping to gather God's people together in order to fulfill the Lord's purpose for them, you're really "scattering" them and leaving them at the mercy of a host of false ideas that will eventually lead to their downfall.

Aren't these things true for us, today? If we're not working with Jesus to bring order and truth into human life, then we're really working against him. We're not supposed to just be entertained by the Christian teaching we hear each week; we're supposed to do something with it, and live it out as we go about our day-to-day activities. And let's not get "scattered" into a lot of other priorities; let's "gather," let's focus on what's really important in maintaining our witness to what the Lord is doing in our world.

Then Jesus tells of a person who has been cleansed of an evil spirit, but the evil spirit returns and brings seven more evil spirits with him, so the person is worse off than he was in the first place. Evil spiritual forces are real. Our culture has taught us to discount the reality of supernatural forces, but people in the biblical world recognize the dangerous influence of spiritual evil. So if a person is cleansed of an evil spirit and doesn't replace that influence in his life with the Holy Spirit, then he's just opened himself to the return of worse evil influences in his life.

This can work with bad habits, too, or behavior patterns — which might be the work of evil influences upon us. For example, a person might give up a harmful



tobacco habit, but if he doesn't put some good habit or practice in its place he might become victimized by something worse, like overeating, or cranky or vindictive or critical behavior toward other people, especially the people most important to him. If you need to get rid of some bad habit or practice in your life, it might be a good idea to replace it with a beneficial practice such as getting more exposure to the Word of God through reading the Bible or listening to Christian teaching in various media.

That thought leads us into the next section of chapter 11, where Jesus speaks of the life-changing power of the Word of God. Here we have a little bit of background for Jesus' saying, because a woman in his audience calls out a blessing on his mother who gave him birth and nurture. No, Jesus replies, more blessed than my mother is every person who hears and obeys the Word of God! What's the Word Jesus is talking about? Of course, for Jesus and the earliest Christians the Word of God is the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. But, more importantly, the Word Jesus is referring to is his own preaching — his announcement that God has returned to his people, and the kingdom of God is here! And he illustrates this from the story of the prophet Jonah.



Paul, in 1 Corinthians 1:22, points out that "Jews demand signs" to validate the message from God. In other words, we'll believe God is real and is speaking to us when we see some great and otherwise unexplainable action, what we today call a "miracle." Now, when Matthew relates this incident, which might actually have been on a

similar occasion, he tells us that Jesus speaks of the sign of Jonah's being in the belly of the great fish and then being released after three days. This, Matthew says, relates to the resurrection of Jesus on the third day — and, indeed, after he was raised his resurrection is indeed the "sign" that he is Israel's long-awaited Messiah. But that isn't in Luke's account of this saying.

Instead, as Luke tells it, Jesus points to a different sign: not a "miracle," but the *preaching* of the message of God. You're looking for a miraculous "sign," Jesus says, but you won't get one. What you're getting is my preaching, my announcement of the kingdom of God. Jesus doesn't say the people of Nineveh repented because they heard about Jonah's adventure with the great fish. No, they repented because Jonah *preached to them*. "The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (11:32). Better respond to my preaching, Jesus says, because you're not going to get anything better than that — at least, not now.

Is that a warning for you and me? Folks, we've got to take *preaching* seriously and not just pass it off as a half hour of entertainment on Sunday morning. As you prepare to call a new pastor, don't look for him to walk on water. Don't expect him to be more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Don't expect him to be Superman, performing great "signs" and doing for the church what you might not be willing to do yourself. But *listen to his preaching* and act on it. We need to gather with Jesus in the light of the Word of God, or otherwise we're just "scattering" and throwing away the opportunity to be fellow-workers with God in building up the new creation.

Now let's turn to Luke's chapter 12, and jump to another section in this *catena* or chain of sayings of Jesus. As we begin, we find that Jesus has encountered opposition. His preaching has upset the status quo of the



religious establishment, and he's becoming a threat to their influence. I would point out that earlier, in chapter 11, verse 29, Luke tells us that "the crowds were increasing." And here, at the beginning of chapter 1, he reports that "so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another." This movement of Jesus isn't just the activity of some harmless wandering guru with a small handful of devotees. Jesus is heading up a large, developing movement that's becoming a force in the Jewish community. The Book of Acts tells us that on the day of Pentecost, after Jesus' resurrection, *three thousand people* came into the movement. Jesus is building up something big, and the "powers that be" don't like that.

Luke 11:53—12:3



"The crowds were increasing" – Luke 11:29. Jesus is leading a large, growing movement that has become a threat to the established authorities in the Jewish community.

So Jesus warns his disciples to look out for the "leaven of the Pharisees," that hidden, undercover opposition that works like leaven in a lump of dough. And he proceeds to that enigmatic statement, "Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known" (12:2). Wow, it looks like Jesus has been listening to the latest news broadcasts about the undercover conspiracies of the "deep state," trying to bring down the current administration in Washington, or about the WikiLeaks exposure of the CIA's intelligence-gathering methods or the emails of various political figures — the hidden "leaven," the exposure of hidden things! But no, we mustn't make that kind of interpretive leap into modern times! Jesus is speaking to his own disciples: "What *you* have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops" (12:3). I think this is not a warning but a promise: You, my followers, have seen the kingdom of God coming to reality in my way of life in your midst; the day is coming when that way of life will be proclaimed all across the world!

Jesus continues, in this chain of sayings Luke has put together, with several brief, but striking, statements and we have time today only to touch upon them briefly. First, Jesus tells his followers not to fear those who could kill them, because once they've done that there's nothing else they can do. Rather, he says, "Fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell" (12:5). Who is Jesus talking about? He wouldn't be talking about the devil, because Jesus would never tell his followers to *fear* the devil; besides, the devil wouldn't have the kind of authority Jesus is talking about. On the other hand, is he talking about the Lord? Does the Lord kill people, and then cast them into hell? Actually, the Greek text doesn't say "hell"; it says *Gehenna*, which was the Jerusalem city dump! Jesus is speaking about someone, or some influence, that could bring our life to ruin and consign it to the scrap heap — and we ought to be wary of such a power. Honestly, I don't know who Jesus is referring to here, but we can still draw out an application for you and me today. The truth is that you and I, with the attitudes we have and the choices we make, are the ones who can really bring our own lives to ruin. So maybe we ought to *fear ourselves* in our most thoughtless and self-centered moments, and ask for the Lord's help to transform us into better people than we are, with a more hopeful future.

Following up on this, Jesus then reminds us that God cares for us so much that we ought not to be worried about our life, but rather trust in his goodness to us. As he says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, don't be anxious about your life, but seek God's kingdom — his rule and order in your life — and your real needs will be supplied. God knows what we need; as he says here, "even the hairs of your head are all numbered," and he asks, Aren't you more valuable than the sparrows who don't seem to worry about where their next meal is

DO NOT FEAR THOSE WHO
KILL THE BODY
 BUT ARE UNABLE TO
 KILL THE SOUL; BUT RATHER
FEAR HIM
 WHO IS ABLE TO DESTROY
 BOTH BODY AND SOUL
IN HELL.

Who is Jesus talking about?

coming from? That idea — that people are more valuable than birds — doesn't go over too well in our culture of today, where some people get all excited about protecting "endangered species" because they *don't* believe people are more important. Those people have a logical problem with that attitude, perhaps several logical problems, but I won't go into that here. Let's just say that Jesus is encouraging us to trust God for what we need because our God is the same God who cares for everything else in his creation, and sustains it by his Word of power (Hebrews 1:3). As the song says, "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he's watching me."

"Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows." – Luke 12:7



Finally, today, we come to two sayings about the Holy Spirit, who is the life of God at work in us. First, Jesus states that if we "blaspheme" the Holy Spirit — speak against him and deny his work in us — we can never be forgiven. We can be forgiven for a lot of foolish things, but to deny the Holy Spirit is the "unforgivable sin." Why would that be? If our

salvation, our rescue from the disorder of this world, depends on the work of the Son of man on our behalf, wouldn't speaking against *him* be the sin of which we could never be forgiven? No — something must happen to us, and in us, *before* we can turn to the Son for forgiveness, and that thing that happens in our spirits to bring us to conviction and lead us to Jesus is the work of the Spirit of God within us. In other words, if we cut off the leading of the Spirit we will never get to "square one" in connecting with the life God has for us. Everything depends on our response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and if we just shut out that leading — if we "quench the Spirit," as Paul warns us not to do (1 Thessalonians 5:19) — we'll remain stuck right where we are. We need to learn how to more readily respond to the Spirit of God: in our worship, in our witness, in our decision-making, in our general conduct of life.

And, if we learn to do that, Jesus adds, then when we're put into situations where people are questioning our faith we won't have to worry about how to defend ourselves. "The Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (12:12). That's not an argument against being prepared with thorough knowledge of the Scriptures and the principles of our faith; after all, Jesus is teaching those things to the very people he's telling to rely on the Spirit "when push comes to shove." But it's

Jesus' way of reminding us that if we've committed ourselves to following him, and equipped ourselves with the spiritual weapons we need to do that, then we don't need to be worried about whether we can stand up to opposition when our faith is tested.

That's our sample from Luke's Gospel for this week, and next week we'll continue with a look at some of those distinctive parables of Jesus that Luke records in this fascinating book.

"Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." – Luke 12:10



What is the Unforgivable Sin?

We need to learn how to more readily respond to the Spirit of God, in our worship, in our witness, in our decision-making, in our general conduct of life. If we learn to do that, Jesus tells us, then when we're put into situations where people are questioning our faith we won't have to worry about how to defend ourselves.

"The Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say." – Luke 12:12.



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