

LUKE 12

Luke 12:1–12. God’s Influence

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 611–613.

The Savior’s concern for the end-time lies broadly across these sayings, including a solemn sense of the Final Judgment and the disclosures that will then occur. Threateningly, Jesus warns His hearers that “nothing covered . . . shall not be revealed” and that, in their concerns for this life, they should not lose sight of Him who “hath power to cast into hell” (Luke 12:2, 5). Moreover, those who turn from Jesus in this life “shall be denied before the angels of God,” and those who blaspheme “against the Holy Ghost . . . shall not be forgiven” (12:9–10).

Laced into these dark omens runs a bright and colorful band of glowing assurances that God is aware even of sparrows and that He numbers “the very hairs of your head” (12:6–7). Furthermore, the Son of Man will “confess before the angels of God” those who acknowledge Him and will forgive those who speak against Him (12:8, 10). Finally, as a lovely ornament that rests atop a faithful person’s life, “the Holy Ghost shall teach you . . . what ye ought to say” in moments of anxiety and crisis (12:12).

All of this is to say that the here and now carries enormous weight in the face of the coming judgment, both our small acts and our grand, daring enterprises. God, who sees all, is fully aware of our best and our worst. Remarkably, and almost unbelievably, He stands ready to demonstrate that we “are of more value than many sparrows” (12:7); He stands ready, with the Son of Man, to acknowledge our discipleship and to forgive us in heavenly realms; He stands ready, with the aid of the Holy Ghost, to inspire us in our hour of deepest need.

The proof of such inspiration, of course, comes into the lives and ministries of His disciples when, under pressure of some sort, they receive heaven’s guiding touch.¹ Jesus evidently directs His remarks to the

Twelve, calling them “my friends,” a title reserved for them. Such a notation points back to an eyewitness account that is preserved among these men, though the common scholarly wisdom holds that Luke draws his information from a written source shared with Matthew and is responsible for creating the setting for Jesus’s sayings. In response, the observation that He turns from one audience to another—from disciples (12:4, 22) to members of the accompanying crowd (12:13–14, 54)—suggests a vivid memory of the occasion when Jesus utters most or all of these sayings, much as the Resurrected Savior does among His New World hearers.²

Lying tantalizingly among Jesus’s words rests the point that as Jesus suffers harassment and persecution, so will His closest followers. Just like Jesus, they will not escape. And just like Jesus’s, their woes will come not just from Jewish authorities but from Gentile officials as well. The whole world will fight against them (Luke 20:17; 1 Nephi 11:34–36). But their consolation is that, unlike with human connections in which one party often abandons the other in crises, sometimes even in families (Luke 21:16), Jesus will not leave them without comfort and will reward them in their difficulties. For in their distress “there shall not an hair of your head perish” (21:18), they will “possess [their] souls” (21:19), and He will send the Holy Ghost to aid them “in the same hour” (12:12).

A final coloration requires comment. In a Gospel that features so much about forgiveness, how does Jesus’s saying about forgiveness for the one who speaks “a word against the Son of man” play into Luke’s larger portrait? Is this merely a generic promise? It seems not. A person need look no further than Peter’s denial. In this account, three times Peter denies the Savior in strong language (22:55–60). Can Peter obtain forgiveness for such an act? After all, Jesus threatens, “He that denieth me before men shall be denied before the angels of God” (12:9), effectively drawing down upon Peter’s head a divine condemnation. But triumphing over this frightening prospect rises the cleansing, restoring powers of forgiveness wherein Peter can bathe and find freshening freedom.

Luke 12:13–21. On Earthly Treasures

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 617–618.

Luke alone preserves this account of a man engaged in a property dispute, and it fits neatly within his larger interest in money matters. Only Luke records a number of the Savior’s sayings and experiences that pointedly have to do with wealth and position.³ The general thrust of these reports carries a sharp warning about allowing one’s life to become inextricably intertwined with the goods and values of this world, thus potentially degrading one’s connections to heaven.

On one level, Jesus shows off His skills at parrying an irrelevant inquiry from a man involved in a dispute over property and turning the question to the main thrust of His remarks, the decisive influence

of God in one's life, whether in this life or the next, and whether one recognizes it or not. The man who makes the request has already fallen into the grasp of greed and essentially demands that Jesus render a judgment on property that is in favor of the man against his brother. To this demand—the verb *to speak* is in the imperative (Luke 12:13)—Jesus responds with His story about a man whose greed is fueled by his abundance but who exercises no real control over his future.

In the marrow of Jesus's response, in the form of the story about the landowner, grows the issue of one's attitude toward wealth and possessions. Within these lines, especially in Luke 12:17–19, the pronouns *I* and *my* jump out at the reader. In the story, the landowner's interest rests almost exclusively on himself—to such a pitch that he becomes self-indulgent, blind to the needs of others, blind to the thanks properly owed to God for his abundance, even blind to constructing a more meaningful life for himself. His possessions have so captured him that in their grasp, he loses perspective, identifying his “soul” with the privileges of possessing, much as the rich young ruler will do (18:18–25). The landowner has reduced his life to the ownership of things.

More than this, Jesus's response to the man's request that He serve as judge in a dispute over property discloses that some earthly matters do not require divine aid, such as questions over inheritance. The laws and customs for such matters are already in place and do not require special intervention, a heavenly intervention in this case, because of who Jesus is. Luke's story, because Luke and his readers know who Jesus is, stretches beyond the workaday world and raises a question about divine intervention in routine matters of life. Within Jesus's response stands a firm respect for custom and law in His society, aspects that He will not overturn, as in the case of paying taxes to Caesar (20:21–25).

Finally, Jesus's question to the man with a dispute, “Who made me a judge?” (12:14), brings forward the issue of Jesus's respect for proper, even formal, procedure. His question, in fact, underlines His lofty respect. On one level, He is not a breaker of laws and customs. On another, He embraces them and follows them, including an ordered approach to established procedure. The Gospels and other scriptural sources offer testimony to the formal nature of His own commissioning by His Father. Notably, in both the calling and empowering of the Twelve and Seventy, He scrupulously follows a pattern of praying, calling, instructing, and then sending forth His emissaries, much as a king or governor would do.⁴

Luke 12:22–34. On God as Provider

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 625–627.

Although Luke's original design of his report on Jesus's words about how the natural world works does not include dividing his Gospel into chapters (a later phenomenon from the thirteenth century), the teachings of the Savior that he gathers into chapter 12 are bracketed by the noisy exchange that ends

chapter 11 (see Luke 11:39–54) and the dual news of Pilate’s execution of some fellow Galileans and of a terrible accident in Jerusalem (13:1–5). Within chapter 12, we reach a discoverable midpoint of these teachings, in 12:31, typically an emphatic position. Here, we come upon Jesus’s directive, “seek ye the kingdom of God,” a fitting high point and forceful focus to His words.

As a strengthening strand, Jesus reinforces these words within seconds when He utters, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (12:34). The measure of a person’s mortal intentions, unlike the earthly driven goals of others, will consist in whether the kingdom of God holds the top rung in earthly priorities, whether the heart pines after “a treasure in the heavens” (12:33), and whether believers are “like unto men that wait for their Lord” (12:36).

Luke’s notation that the Savior intends the teachings of this section for His disciples (12:22) while the larger crowd stands nearby (12:1, 54) finds reinforcement in the series of imperatives—commandments—that Jesus utters, knowing that He holds leverage with His devoted followers. At first, Jesus’s directives are mild and involve mostly acts of thinking: “take no thought,” “consider the ravens,” and “consider the lilies” (12:22, 24, 27). But then they grow more forceful and impact how one lives life, how a person meets basic physical and spiritual needs: “seek not what ye shall eat,” “neither be anxious,” “seek ye the kingdom,” “fear not, little flock,” and “sell . . . give alms . . . provide yourselves bags” (12:29, 31–33). The following imperatives continue this crescendo, bringing further unity to the whole: “Let your loins be girded” (12:35) and “Be ye therefore ready” (12:40). In this light, Jesus has moved His disciples from a contemplative reception of His words to a response of needed action and specified direction.

These verses are also full of references to Jesus’s refined acquaintance with His Father. Plainly, He knows His Father’s mind; He knows His Father’s will; He knows His Father’s actions. The sheer density of Jesus’s declarations about God, His Father, strikes the ears of a hearer: “God feedeth [the ravens]” (12:24), “God . . . clothe[s] the grass” (12:28), “your Father knoweth that ye have need” (12:30), “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give” (12:32), “[God] will make [the obedient servant] ruler over all” (12:44), and “[God] will cut [the disobedient servant] in sunder” (12:46). These observations, of course, buttress the main theme of this chapter—the ever-present influence of God in a person’s life, whether in this life or the one to come, whether recognized or not. The natural companion of this dawning recognition features the assuring realization that people do not live in a chaotic world, though it may seem so, but one controlled by God (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:81–84).

The whole matter of wealth and possessions that slithers through this chapter, beginning with the man’s request that Jesus settle his inheritance quarrel (Luke 12:13), threatens both rich and poor. With practiced perception, Jesus brings forward the corrupting power of wealth and warns against its trapping tentacles, which in the case of the foolish landowner, have led him to believe that he holds control over the course and length of his life (12:19–20). Elsewhere in scripture, we read that the poor can fall into a cycle of envy that is difficult to escape: “Whose bellies are not satisfied, . . . and whose eyes are full of greediness” (Doctrine and Covenants 56:17). In a remarkable reassurance, Jesus affirms that even mundane

pursuits of daily life that involve concerns for food and clothing and shelter are shared by God. This means that we can offload our worries, laying them on Him. To be sure, we cannot turn our backs on the necessity of providing for the needs of those within our families and stewardships. But we should not worry because God can and will make up our deficiencies.

Luke 12:35–40. Parable of the Prepared Servants

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 633–635.

The first verse of this section (Luke 12:35) changes the focus of the Savior’s words and introduces a series of stories that focus on readiness and that stretch to the end of the chapter (12:35–59). The first consists of His parable on the prepared servants. Notably, the additions and changes in the Joseph Smith Translation add emphasis to Jesus’s interaction with His disciples about readiness (see Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 12:39–47). For instance, the Joseph Smith Translation adds the emphatic expression “verily I say unto you” just before “blessed are those servants, whom the lord . . . shall find watching” (12:37; Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 12:40). Moreover, one finds an entire verse appended to Luke 12:37 that stresses Jesus’s multiple arrivals in this world, implying strongly the need for readiness because events occur at night: “For, behold, he cometh in the first watch of the night, and he shall also come in the second watch, and again he shall come in the third watch” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 12:41). Furthermore, a new saying of Jesus appears that brings emphasis to His sudden arrival: “And now, verily I say these things unto you, that ye may know this, that the coming of the Lord is as a thief in the night.”⁵ As a further addition, Jesus warns the one who “watcheth not his goods, [that] the thief cometh in an hour of which he is not aware, and taketh his goods, and divideth them among his fellows” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 12:45). Hence, the unready person loses all.

Many see Jesus’s sayings in this section of Luke’s report as reshaped by a later Christian response to the delay in the Second Coming, assuming that people were expecting Jesus to return in the near future. Others understand the sayings as coming from later Christians because Jesus’s audience, including His disciples, would not have comprehended His references to a Second Coming. But these viewpoints assume that Jesus did not talk about His Second Coming and the need for proper preparation, no matter the circumstances, at any time during His ministry. In response, one observes that a similar set of sayings appears in Matthew 24:42–51 and in Mark 13:32–37, including Jesus’s story about the irresponsible servant that one finds in Luke 12:42–46. To be sure, the settings in the Gospels differ and the language of the sayings is not the same, elements that lead scholars to see Christian motives at work because of the delay in Jesus’s return. But the possibility that Jesus teaches the same principles on different occasions cannot

be set aside lightly. Moreover, interest in preparing for the future, no matter what the future brings, has always been a verifiable part of Jesus's teaching from the beginning.⁶

In this light, we can ask the question whether Jesus's words about readiness extend to more than just His Second Coming. In light of His constant return to this theme, the answer has to be yes. Of course, the Second Coming forms much of the motivation for proper preparation, as Jesus's saying illustrates: "The Son of man cometh" (Luke 12:40). But unforeseen events always take a toll on those who have prepared little. One of those moments is merely months away—Jesus's Crucifixion. If, in fact, the lord of the parable is metaphorically tied to Jesus and the watchful servants represent His disciples, as is evident, then this possibility becomes even stronger. For Jesus's death will catch His closest followers off guard, temporarily scattering them (Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27).

Almost unnoticed at the beginning of Jesus's story is His explicit nod toward the wedding that the lord returns from (Luke 12:36). In Jesus's narration, His appeal might be to any occasion that takes the master away from his home. But Jesus chooses a wedding to garnish His story. Why? Because, it seems, He is pushing forward an emphasis on the home for anyone who will pay attention, an emphasis that one sees, for instance, in Luke 11:14–26 and 14:1–24, passages that precede and follow this one, adding prominence to the wedding rather than subtracting from it (see the comments on Luke 11:17–26).

Luke 12:41–48. Parable of the Unfaithful Servant

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 641–643.

Peter's question initiates the Savior's enormously important response about how His servants are to act in His absence, drawing out of Him this parable about an unfaithful servant. It is almost as if Jesus was waiting for someone to ask a question that would allow Him to disclose both the principles and the promised events that lie within these lines. Peter, the chief of Jesus's Apostles, shows his acumen in grasping the significance of Jesus's prior words: "Lord, speakest thou this parable unto us, or even to all?" (Luke 12:41). He not only seeks clarity in his own mind and in the minds of his fellow believers about Jesus's Second Coming but also wants to fix proper standards for expected service, to which Jesus's sayings about the needed response of servants and the house owner point (12:36–39). Notably, in responding, Jesus enunciates both principles and approaching events to the Twelve loudly enough that all can hear because a large crowd hovers around them at this moment (12:1, 13, 54). What He says is for all.

In mild contrast, in a series of significant additions the Joseph Smith Translation clarifies that Jesus aims His stories principally toward the disciples; anyone else can listen in, of course: "The Lord said, I speak unto those whom the Lord shall make rulers over his household"; "the Lord said unto them [the disciples]"; as a warning to them, "the evil servant is he who is not found watching"; unlike the disciples,

“they [the critics] are not well pleased with the Lord’s doings” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 12:49, 51, 54, 58). Taken as a whole, these changes place Jesus’s parable-like sayings clearly in the realm of leadership instruction. Within the language of expectation for the Second Coming, He is plainly pushing and cajoling His disciples into grasping fully His expectations for them as His leaders.

Within the Greek text, pointers to this conclusion also stand conspicuously visible. For example, in all these stories Jesus assumes a setting in a house or estate. This point becomes all the more clear when He mentions “house” and “household” (Luke 12:39, 42). It is a small step to see the house of Israel or the household of the church in these scenes. Second, the double and therefore emphatic verb form “shall make ruler” (12:42, 44) brings forward a formal installing in an office or a setting apart for official functions. Third, the differing responses of the masters, stewards, and servants in Jesus’s stories illustrate proper and improper relationships that characterize those in positions of responsibility, a matter that is readily transferrable to a church leadership setting. In fact, this aspect is so clear that some scholars have postulated an influence of the later church in this dialogue, essentially saying that much in these stories goes beyond what Jesus would have said because they are so clearly aimed at later church leaders. Such a view, of course, presumes that Jesus does not concern Himself with ecclesiastical matters during His ministry, a view that cannot be maintained in light of this and other evidence.

The second common thread that binds all these stories together is that of Jesus’s eventual return. This theme weaves itself through each of Jesus’s sayings, creating a colorful tapestry of expectation and almost mystery about the future. And in light of statements such as, “There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God” (9:27), and “My lord delayeth his coming” (12:45), almost all scholars conclude that these parables treat the postponed Second Coming, believing that Jesus sees His return as immediate, which does not happen. But among the earliest references to the Second Coming in the New Testament, from the Apostle Paul, stands a view of much time passing: “We beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . that ye be not soon shaken in mind . . . that the day of Christ is at hand . . . except there come a falling away first” (2 Thessalonians 2:1–3). Plainly, Paul envisions both a long time passing and, to complicate the picture, an apostasy or “a falling away” or, more properly, an internal rebellion, as the Greek term (*apostasia*) shows. Actually, the expression is “the apostasy,” for Paul writes the definite article as though his readers will know exactly what he means. From these observations, it is plain that the earliest Christians already understand that the Second Coming is in the distant future and that much will happen before that day.

The last aspect that draws a reader’s gaze highlights Jesus’s treatment of sin. This dimension runs rich throughout His stories, burnishing their details into a shining statement about choices made for good or for ill, about responsibility kept or ignored, about authority respected or gone mad. On the first level, all culminates in His dual judgment about “that servant, which knew his lord’s will” and the servant “that knew not.” The issue centers on punishments, “beaten with many stripes” and “beaten with few stripes” (Luke 12:47–48). From the words that must have lingered in His hearers’ minds, we learn first and foremost that

one punishment does not fit all; rather, varied punishments hang in Jesus’s words. The mirror image logically extends to rewards as well—God grades the rewards that He hands to recipients; not all are the same, as both Jesus and the Apostle Paul specify: “In my Father’s house are many mansions,” and “There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial. . . . So also is [the reward of] the resurrection.”⁷

The second part concerns sinning knowingly or unknowingly. Those who know, of course, bear the full weight of their decision to turn away from the instructions of the Master and “shall be beaten with many stripes.”⁸ For those who sin in ignorance, the resulting punishment is much lighter, “few stripes” (Luke 12:48). But this prospect does not exhaust the matter. Other scriptural sources point to an even lighter outcome. In the words of an angel who appears to King Benjamin, “[the Savior’s] blood atoneth for the sins of those . . . who have died not knowing the will of God concerning them, or who have ignorantly sinned” (Mosiah 3:11). Similarly, the prophet Alma declares that “it shall be more tolerable for them [the Lamanites] in the day of judgment . . . for it is because of the traditions of their fathers that caused them to remain in their state of ignorance; therefore the Lord will be merciful unto them” (Alma 9:15–16). More than this, “those who have part in the first resurrection . . . are they that have died before Christ came, in their ignorance, not having salvation declared unto them” (Mosiah 15:24). Plainly, Jesus’s Atonement graciously satisfies the demands of punishment for all those who have sinned in ignorance.

Notes

- 1 See Acts 2:14–36; 4:8–20, 31; 5:27–33.
- 2 3 Nephi 11:9, 21–22; 12:1; 13:25; 14:1; 15:1, 11; 17:1; 18:5, 10, 17, 26, 37.
- 3 Luke 14:7–14; 15:8–10, 11–32; 16:1–9, 10–12, 19–31; 19:1–10.
- 4 Luke 6:12–13, 20; 9:1–6; 10:1–11.
- 5 Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 12:44; see 1 Thessalonians 5:1–6; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; 16:15; Doctrine and Covenants 106:4–5.
- 6 Luke 6:46–49; 9:23–26; 10:13–15; 11:29–32; 12:4–5; 13:1–9, 24–28; 17:20–37; Mark 1:14–15.
- 7 John 14:2; 1 Corinthians 15:40, 42; see Doctrine and Covenants 76:50–92; 88:20–24; 131:1–4.
- 8 Luke 12:47; see 2 Nephi 9:27; Mosiah 3:12; 3 Nephi 6:18.

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