

A sepia-toned photograph of a group of people in a meeting or workshop. In the foreground, a person's hands are visible, holding a pen and writing on a notepad. Other people are blurred in the background, some looking towards the camera and others looking away. The overall mood is professional and collaborative.

PYAC'22

thoughts for leaders

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PYAC 22 // Notes for Group Leaders

Intro: Basic Group Leader Information

Pointers for leading group discussions

Thank you for being available to lead a discussion group at the Philly Young Adults Conference.

As you know the conference is going to be divided into four sessions, each of which will feature a short introduction to the passage at hand then a time for discussion of the passage. We hope to end the sessions in prayer together as well. As discussion group leader, you can act as a prayer leader for your group as well.

We're going to be reading a section of Jesus' teaching from Luke 12, and the idea behind the discussions is that we'd spend the time observing and applying the words of Christ. Everyone will be provided with a booklet which has discussion questions for each session. In our experience with this kind of gathering in our young adults fellowship at Calvary Philly, we've found that having a person or two to lead the group is helpful. But the role of the group leader here is not exactly to teach the passage. The idea is more that the leader would provide a necessary focal point for the group—the simple need for *someone* to say, “Let’s get started” or, “what does everyone think about question 3,” or “I think I see something similar in that verse...” means that a leader helps organize things and move things along. And that’s really your role—help organize the discussion, and help move it along if it begins to bog down. Additionally, it helps to have someone designated to bring things back on course if someone takes the discussion in an unhelpful direction, or if someone in the group is having trouble understanding what is supposed to be going on.

The discussion questions you'll be provided with direct us to look into the scriptures by doing things like looking for lists, creating summaries, noticing connections between verses, and thinking about the implications of the things Jesus said. Learning to look for and notice these types of things in any text of the bible is a key to being able to find God's meaning for yourself. The main point of discussing the scripture together is that it's a way to hear the word and learn *together*. The discussion leader is the person who keeps this in mind and helps nudge the group in this direction. Whenever some help is needed to move the discussion along, you might simply direct the group's attention to a particular question, or you might offer some thoughts on an answer to the question yourself, or make an observation that could help others see things too.

The time allotted for discussion groups is going to range from 25 to 40 minutes. Probably most of these times will be about a half-an-hour. There is probably time to discuss most of the questions for each session, but covering them all is not the point. A successful group time is one that truly interacts with the scriptures at hand. If a group spends 30 minutes going deep and edifying each other in response to one or two of the questions, that's a success, and the group leader should go with it as it's happening! You shouldn't feel like you have to move things along just to get to all the questions. You also shouldn't feel like you have to explain every concept in the passage. Most likely the groups will focus on a few ideas in the passage, or the idea of the passage as a whole. You can simply see where the discussion naturally heads, and as long as you sense that it is edifying the group and actually pertains to the passage, let the Spirit lead. The number of questions provided is simply designed to help prevent people from running out of things to think about.

A note on Thinking (Talking) Together

The way we think together about the scriptures is to talk about them with each other--to pose questions to each other, to make observations and connections for each other, and to share how the scriptures relate to our lives, together. This is how we'll spend the bulk of our time together. When talking about the scriptures, let's concentrate on remembering a couple things: We are primarily here to discuss the scriptures, not simply our own lives. The key here is to continue thinking about the words on the page and what they mean. The best applications can be personal, but don't need to be overly specific, so that as many people as possible can relate to them.

Session 1: Luke 12:1-12

The opening of verse 1 is "in the meantime." This means that what Jesus says in chapter 12 is set in the context of what was happening in chapter 11. You can read about what was happening as Jesus began this teaching in 11:53-54. The setting would be all of chapter 11, and in fact, everything since 9:51, which tells us that Jesus had begun to focus ("set his face") on heading up to Jerusalem in order to accomplish his death on our behalf. As he moved south, he began to face growing opposition and hostility. Chapter 12 records some of the things he said in that context.

This explains the reference to "hypocrisy" in the beginning of Jesus' teaching—this wasn't a random diatribe against hypocrisy, it was a warning to his followers against the danger of being corrupted by the same sins which were corrupting the establishment that was coalescing against him (as exemplified by the Pharisees).

Nevertheless, Jesus did regularly warn his followers against hypocrisy, which points out another important thing to know about this weekend's passage—the things Jesus says in chapter 12 were most likely things he said a lot, in different ways, as he travelled and taught. James Edwards summarizes this well in his commentary: *"Teachings that are the same or similar to the teachings in this unit also appear in...[places like] Matthew 5-7 and [Matthew] 24, and to a lesser extent in Mark and elsewhere in Luke. The repetition and echo of the teachings in Luke 12 throughout [the other Gospel accounts] leaves the impression the sayings preserved in this unit were regular themes in Jesus' ministry."* In other words—you see this a lot in the Gospel accounts—Jesus seems to have repeated many of his teachings many times, and often varied details and wording to fit the teaching to the exact audience and situation he was in on any given day.

Edwards points out another helpful insight into this chapter as a whole. The way Jesus taught was targeted at his followers, specifically instructing his disciples, but it was said in a way that kept the larger group of people who were often present in mind. He spoke to his followers in such a way that if someone was *not* a follower of Jesus, and listened in, they could be challenged and sense that they were invited in to becoming a follower of Christ themselves. If you listened to Jesus teach and you weren't his follower, you would sense that there was a *distinction* between those who were followers and those who were not, but not a *barrier* that you couldn't pass. Again, everyone was invited into the group. Edwards says that the *center* of Jesus' teaching *"is directed at disciples, but its periphery radiates to the surrounding crowds, allowing them to hear Jesus' call to discipleship and inviting them to respond in faith. The resultant picture may be a model for Luke's church, and the church in every age: Jesus' theological discourse is both edifying and challenging for believers, but mindful, responsive, and inviting of the surrounding culture."*

Of course, this is a great set of directions for our discussion of scripture this weekend as well. Let's bless and challenge each other as followers of Jesus as we discuss his word, and let's remember that there may be non-believers in our midst, and we want all our talk to highlight for them both their *need* for Jesus, and his invitation to them to come and join the family.

Another General note: It's helpful to know that Jesus faced opposition. When we face it as his followers, it doesn't mean that we're failing. It may mean that we're doing exactly what he wants us to do, and being exactly what he wants us to be.

So, in terms of the section for the first session, it falls into two sub-sections:

Verse 1-3 are the warning against hypocrisy. I decided not to ask questions about that for the discussion time. This is because I think people get very passionate about hypocrisy and want to talk about it, but often not in the same way Jesus talks about it. So I decided to focus everyone's attention on what Jesus spends more time on, the teaching about facing opposition, fear of man, and fear of God in verses 4-11. If we're honest, those are probably front-burner issues for us to think about in our day.

So, for verses 4-11, I think we can use the questions to get us thinking about the connections Jesus makes between how we feel when people oppose us for the gospel, and how we fear God. Jesus sets the fear of man and the fear of God in direct opposition, and leads us to the conclusion that they are mutually exclusive—you can't fear God and fear man at the same time. In other words, the two fears cancel each other out. I think it would be great for us to use our group time to look into the details of what Jesus teaches to see *how* that dynamic works.

Jesus' logic runs like this:

1. When you are deciding who to fear, think about what the limits of their power are. What is the most they could do?
2. If the most they could do is kill you, then you have no reason to fear them (!). That's verse 4. In other words, Jesus wants us to expand our thinking *beyond* the grave. If we don't take eternity into account, we won't be able to make correct value judgements in a confusing world.
3. If someone has power over us after we die, then that is the person we need to take into account the most—that is the person we need to worry about, so to speak (v.5).
4. Maybe there will be people who can put you on trial before other powerful people, and you may face the consequences of their wrath (v.11), but keep in mind the more powerful government, the one run by Jesus (v.8).

The point of discussing this is to sink our minds into what Jesus says, to let his way of thinking begin to permeate our thoughts, in order to let what he says conquer the fear of man in us, and free us from worrying about the wrong things, and give us boldness to say and do what Jesus tells us to no matter what opposition we might face.

As we talk and pray, it would be good for all of us to see how boldness is a necessary quality for a follower of Jesus, and how his teaching stirred boldness up. (That's what question 8 asks about...)

Session 2: Luke 12:13-34

This section of Jesus' teaching also falls into two sections. In verses 13-21 Jesus answers the question from the crowd with a parable. Then in verses 22-34 he explains the application of the parable for his disciples. Notice again the two-tier focus of Jesus teaching: it's directed specifically to his disciples, those who've made the decision to follow him, but it's conscious of the larger crowd around him—those who he wants to invite in to the circle. Another of Jesus' common tendencies is on display here as well, which is his practice of speaking in parables when he is speaking directly to the crowd of people who have not committed to following him. This was a pattern for him—when speaking to the larger crowds, he tended to use parables, which evidently were intended to provoke a desire to understand in a deeper, clearer way what Jesus was saying, which *should* have drawn the hearer to press closer in to Jesus in order to ask questions and learn more. If someone wanted to know more, and spent more time with Jesus, they could get their questions answered, or at least they could overhear the kind of direct, more straightforward teachings Jesus tended to use with his disciples, such as what we have in the second section here, verses 22-34.

In the discussion questions I attempted to focus on what I think is the main point of Jesus' teaching, which also happens to be very relevant for those who we'll be spending the weekend with—and probably, us too. For the first two questions, let's discuss the parable from the standpoint of the big lesson—and Jesus tells us up front what his main point is, in verse 15. "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for man's life does not consist in the abundance of things he possesses," that's Jesus' answer to the man with the family inheritance dispute. And so, to help us know what he means, he tells a story to *show* what it looks like if someone thinks that their life *does* consist in the abundance of their possession. Question 1 tries to help get at that. Jesus knows that thinking about someone *else's* life can help us begin to see our *own* lives in a new light. So in discussing question 2 we're inviting ourselves to step into the story, take the perspective of the Rich Fool for a minute, and feel the pull of temptation towards the things Jesus is warning about. In doing so, we can turn back to our own lives and see where we too feel similar pulls. Hopefully our groups can engage in some good personal reflection.

A couple helpful things to notice about the main character in Jesus' parable: The culture of the Jesus' day in Israel was a very connected, family-oriented culture. His hearers would have noticed that this man had no one else—no one to share his wealth with certainly. They would have noticed that the man's wealth had isolated him and left him with no one. This is a powerful truth about a tendency of wealth. Also, the fact that God calls this man a fool is particularly interesting, since he was not a fool in the usual senses of the word biblically—he was not a fool in business, or personal economics, or in planning for the future or in laziness. He was not wicked or unjust either. His issue is that he ignored God. It was more like Psalm 53:1, "*The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'*"

In Questions 3 and 4 we're trying to focus on the way Jesus teaches us not to worry and what practical help we can draw from his teaching. In verses 23-26 and verse 30 Jesus is stating bare truths about life and about God, and he is pressing us to see the implications of these verses in ways that will make worrying impossible. For instance, in verses 23 through 26, he simply points out that, in nature we see that God is the kind of God who takes care of the things he makes, and then Jesus invites us to reason from the lesser to the greater—since we know that God places more value on us than birds or flowers, doesn't this care for the inanimate things in nature show us that we can be as worry free as the birds and flowers are? The word "consider" in those verses is great. And by thinking about these things in our groups together we're *doing* that—we're taking time to allow Jesus to turn our attention to the world around us, and to think about what he points out. In verse 30 Jesus turns our attention to the truth *behind*

the fact that we matter more than flowers—and this is the amazing reality that God relates to Jesus’ followers as his *children*. God is our father, Jesus says in verse 30. That’s different than how he relates to birds or flowers. He is their maker. And he takes care of them. But he is your father. Jesus knows that this one truth is enough to change everything for someone. If the universe is a place where there is no Father, it is a dangerous, harsh place with only death as the final guarantee. But if we live in a world where there is a father, where the father is *our* Father, and where this father is the creator of everything, that is a totally different kind of world to live in. And in that world, we don’t have to worry about how harsh or cold or dangerous the world seems, because our father will make sure that, in the end, we are taken care of—and *that* is Jesus’ final answer to anxiety, and to the man who was anxious about the inheritance his *earthly* father left him, and to the nagging issues we all face everyday. One interesting note: in verse 5 Jesus tells us that the *fear* of God our Father will cure us of worrying about other people. In verse 30 Jesus tells us that the *awareness* of God our Father will cure us of worrying about *life*.

Questions 5 and 6 invites us to consider Jesus’ next direction, where he teaches us that we can know certain things about this father, and what he wants to give us, and then, we can take action and *do* things with our possessions to help us battle worry. Notice that the issue of possessions is exactly what the original questioner was worried about, and what the man in the parable was occupied with—so Jesus ends up answering both by saying something like, instead of fighting about what you can get out of life, or spending all your time managing piles of stuff, why not give away what you have to help people who don’t have, and invest in the kingdom of your heavenly father instead? So many people feel so powerless in the face of anxiety that I think it will be helpful for us to notice the power Jesus puts in our hands—exercising control over your possessions (“taking dominion”), will be *the way* to control your heart too. Maybe we could even say something like, the steering wheel of our hearts is our stuff.

The last question invites everyone to interact with these truths by thinking how we’d articulate them for another person. This is another way to “indirectly” see what Jesus is teaching us—by trying to see it as a third party, and trying to help someone else.

Session 3: Luke 12:35-48

The text for session three also falls nicely into two sections. In verses 35 to 40 Jesus continues teaching, and we can sum up the flow of his thought something like this: The followers of Christ are called to redirect all their priorities to the kingdom of God, and this will help them avoid both the anxiety and worry that consume so much of our world, and the temptation to waste their lives by being concerned only with accumulating and managing things. That’s verses 13 to 34. *Instead*, disciples are called to be occupied with waiting for his return like servants waiting for their master. That’s verses 35 to 40. So—*don’t* forget about the coming of your master, and end up with out of order worries and priorities, and *do* let his coming be front and center in your minds, *crowding out* worries and *realigning* priorities. Then, in verse 41-48 we have the answer Jesus gave to Peter, who asked if this teaching was directed at disciples or the crowds around. Incidentally, this confirms what we’ve been saying about Jesus’ teaching method. It seems that, even at the time, the disciples recognized that Jesus was speaking both to them *and* the crowds who were present, but in different ways. So when Peter heard Jesus’ teaching about being ready, he wondered, and asked, if that teaching applied only to the actual followers of Jesus, the inner circle, or to everyone. Interestingly enough, in verses 42 to 48, Jesus doesn’t answer the question along the lines of Peter’s thinking. I think you could boil down the exchange to something like this: Peter asks, “Is that parable for us as your followers or for everyone?”

And Jesus replies, “Whatever anyone knows, they are responsible for that knowledge. So, if you know my will, do it!” But of course, Jesus is the master teacher, not someone like me trying to understand the master, so, notice that in verses 42 to 48 Jesus answers Peter’s question about who the parable was directed at with...another parable. Or at least, it *seems* like a parable. These verses are one of those times when Jesus seems to offer us something that sounds like a parable but might be more straight forward than originally meets the eye. Maybe the heart of what Jesus says to Peter is found at the very beginning of what he says—be faithful and wise—and the very end—to whom much has been committed, much will be required. So, yes Peter, to you who follow me, I speak as those who know the masters will. Do it. And to those around, who don’t know my will, I speak about my will, so they can begin to hear and learn. Maybe it’s something like that.

The discussion questions are trying to get at exactly this “big takeaway” kind of thing. The first two questions hit this from different angles, and here we’re trying to stir up discussion about the heart of Jesus’ exhortation—that we’d be people who are expectant for, and waiting for, his return. It will probably be very helpful for our discussions to move in this direction—for us to see together that Jesus teaches us to move our affections and desires onto his coming—to take the energy of our hearts and the gravity of our minds off the past or even the present and move them onto the future, a future dominated by him and what will happen when he arrives.

Question 3 asks us to notice a few things that Jesus says will work *against* this kind of thinking in our lives. First, the difficulty for the servants in verses 35-40 is that they don’t know when the master is coming. So instead of letting this be a hindrance to our proper prioritizing, disciples need to let this fact, that we don’t know when he’ll come, be a constant motivation. It’s almost like Jesus says that the uncertainty of the timing of his coming is “a feature, not a bug” of his plan. He wants the uncertainty of the timing to translate into a sense that it could happen at *any* time. He wants it to take what is future and make it always feel present, since it actually could be, at any time. It could be three seconds from now. The second thing that could present a challenge for followers of Jesus is the *delay* in his coming. So, uncertainty about the precise timing, and the length of time in between his departure and his return. It would be great to get our groups to work out together how Jesus taught and warned us beforehand about exactly the things that we face in 2022. We don’t know when he’s coming back, and it’s been so long. But here we have his directions for how we’re supposed to feel and think and live regardless.

Question 5 asks us to apply Jesus’ teaching about those to whom much is given to ourselves—to see that Jesus is speaking down through the ages to people like us, who can read their own copy of his words and who’ve been taught the things in the bible.

Question 6 asks us to think about what kind of effects it will have on us if we take Jesus’ teaching to heart. This is another way of applying these things to ourselves. What will it do to me if I internalize what Jesus says here? How will it affect my emotions, and planning, and thought processes, and priorities? What personal problems will it solve? What personal questions will it answer? Things like that. To give a personal answer, it seems to me that Jesus is pointing us to being the kind of people who will be very emotionally *boyant*—not easily dragged down into fear or depression or anger or detachment or laziness—because our emotions are tied to the future and his coming, and because our emotions are constantly lifted by the possibility, the expectation, that Jesus could come at any moment, and because our emotions are anchored *up* (to steal a phrase from Joe Focht) by the great promises attached to Jesus coming. This kind of person will be able to take emotional punches and not be knocked out—because nothing can shake Jesus’ kingdom, and it’s arriving soon.

And because of this emotional state, this person will be very active in service to Jesus kingdom and preparation for Jesus' arrival—they will understand that the way we prepare for Jesus to come is to do the things he wants done, and to keep doing them no matter what, and what he wants done is for people to be cared for—especially the others who are waiting for his arrival.

Session 4: Luke 12:49-56

The text for this last session of the conference runs just eight verses long. I decided to keep it short, in part because it contains some of the most difficult verses to grapple with (like verses 49 through 52) and in part because a shorter passage to discuss will allow this final session to also act as a wrap up for the weekend. So for this session, let's discuss both Luke 12:49-56, *and* the cumulative takeaway of everything we've read and discussed since Friday night.

To start off this section, verses 49 and 50 are something a personal reflection by Jesus on his own work, and it comes kind of abruptly, breaking in to what he was saying about the need for his followers to orient their lives according to the fact of his coming.

In verse 49, "fire" has the idea of *purging*. In his commentary on this passage, James Edwards writes: *"The kingdom that Jesus inaugurates [does not have the same boundaries as, or occupy the same space] with this world, nor is it the result of evolutionary processes in which the material world evolves into a future spiritual...world. If the kingdom were simply a greater or more complete version of this world, then it would essentially [approve of and authorize] this world, and the coming of Jesus would bring peace to it. The kingdom is not an evolutionary extension of the world, but a judgement of the world, a krisis [to use the Greek term]...There is great disparity between the kingdom and this world. The introduction of the kingdom in Jesus reawakens the world to its alienated existence from its creator and points to its Restorer and Redeemer. [Edwards, p.385].*

So when Jesus refers to "fire on the earth," he moves right on to discussing the division that his coming will create, in the form of judgement on sin, *and* the resulting need, for each person, to make a decision about who Jesus is. The "baptism" seems to refer to Jesus' personal experience of death that he was fast approaching. At this point we're seeing Jesus as a man on a mission, and as he was nearing the end, he was experiencing some urgency and a strong desire to get things moving and accomplished.

The urgency Jesus felt is something that will begin to characterize the lives of his disciples as well. We already saw this in v. 35-36. Those who follow Jesus are those who *wait* for Jesus, and that looks like a focused life which does God's will until Jesus comes (v. 42). So in response to his personal sense of urgency to get his own mission accomplished (v.50) and to see the effects of it fully accomplished in the whole world (v.49), Jesus gives two sets of directions:

First, in verses 51-53, he says, Don't misinterpret what the *immediate* effects of his mission will be. We know that the *ultimate* outcome of Jesus' work will be peace on earth, but first, because of the sin and brokenness in the world, his mission will create division. It was creating that division *right then*, as Jesus was speaking—and so he was telling his followers not to be confused or thrown off by the controversy and opposition that his words and his actions were stirring up. And it was about to get worse, because the cross would be the ultimate divider—only those who were truly dedicating their life to follow Him would continue to associate with him after the shame of crucifixion.

Second, in verses 54-56, he says, Look around, be aware of what's going on right now, and what it means. To the crowds that were around him at that time, Jesus pointed out that they were good at being aware of *some* things, and interpreting *some* kinds of information, but they couldn't look at what he was doing and saying *right then*, right in front of their eyes, and understand what it meant. Being good at knowing some things, while missing the most important things about the time you're living in (from God's perspective)—Jesus calls that "hypocrisy. That alone is incredibly fascinating because of the way it might challenge our view of what "hypocrisy" is. Is Jesus saying something like, being unaware of the most important things will lead you to focus on less important things, and since you were created to be involved in what was most important, *that* will cause you to be *untrue* to what you were made for? Or is he being more direct for those who were near him at that time, saying something like, "The signs of who I am are so obvious that only moral compromise, only *hypocrisy*, would enable you to remain blind to who I am. If you only have eyes enough to notice the sky, you can notice the signs of who I am. You *do* have eyes, so the problem must be in your hearts."?

Another helpful note, in his commentary on this passage James Edwards says, "The Greek word for 'time,' [in verse 56] *Kairos*, does not refer to time as a duration but to time as an opportunity, e.g, time to plant, time to harvest, time to celebrate, time to raise and lower the sails. Kairos is not about ages but about seasons, and how to recognize them." [Edwards p.387] So Jesus is leading his followers to understand that the key question to ask in any age, and in any situation, is something like, "what does God see as the most important thing going on right now?"

The first discussion question draws attention to the actual way Jesus was speaking in these verses, and the common perception on the part of many people in our day about the way Jesus would speak. Many people around us think that they kind of know who Jesus was and what he would do or say, but they actually have no exposure to Jesus' words or actions (as we have them recorded in the scripture) at all. And so the ignorance of people about the real Jesus creates tension when Jesus' followers faithfully represent who Jesus was and what he said, and many non-Christians around us claim that we are *misrepresenting* Jesus when we're actually faithfully following him. Probably just knowing this will be helpful to us as we press forward in following him, even when we're misunderstood.

Question 2 invites us to think about what Jesus says about creating division. Obviously the things Jesus says here about division and fire may feel "unloving" or "divisive" to people. Our part as disciples is to hear these things that Jesus says, which may challenge us, and then to seek to understand how these things are not unloving or inconsistent at all. When we do this, we're led to a deepening understanding of who Jesus really is—as his actual words and actions correct our misunderstanding, expand our view of him, and clarify our grasp of who he is and what he's doing. Every time we run into statements of Jesus that shock us or confuse us, it is a chance for real growth on our part. We'll grow in our ability to represent him faithfully, but we'll also grow closer to him as we understand him more deeply for who he really is. Let's lead our groups in this direction.

Question 3 directs us to think about how these verses apply to our current situation. Question 4 probably provides some direct material for answering question 3. Question 3 asks about the big main point Jesus is making in these verses—which seems to be something about being awake and aware of what is going on in relation to his coming and the kingdom of God. In this sense we begin to see how these verses are less of a break in the flow of thought than it might first appear. Jesus is continuing what he said in verses 35 through 48 by speaking of his personal involvement in all of it, and then, by challenging everyone to make sure they're actually seeing their times like the faithful servants he described in the verses from the third session.

Questions 4 through 6 are designed to help us all pan back and discuss all four sections of Luke 12 we discussed during the weekend together. With these three questions, we can lead our groups in the kinds of discussions which will take us from a conference back out into the lives God has called us to live. There is a lot to digest in these scriptures. But most likely, if we've really read and thought, if we've *heard* Jesus this weekend, our experience will be something like the experience the first followers of Christ had on this day when they heard him teach—we can only imagine that they felt informed, and challenged, and yet slightly overwhelmed as well. Jesus had said so much in so few words. There was a lot to think about, a lot to chew on. There was a whole life he was inviting them into, and events were rushing towards them which he was telling them to expect. He didn't want them thrown off. He didn't want them worrying about what lay ahead. He wanted them to be like servants who knew that their master was coming back soon, at any time, and to be taken up with an expectant, productive waiting for him, no matter what came.

Let's end the weekend by praying together, and asking Jesus to keep instructing us in his way; to keep opening our eyes to see the world like he sees it; to keep us in the place of hope and strength in Him, and anything else your group is led to ask based on all we've read together.