

Fear

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Early last September, Lauren and I went down to St. Louis and spent a couple of days with my sister and brother-in-law before we all went to see the first Mizzou game of the season. That Saturday morning, we went for a walk through a local park, and in that park, there was one of those swing sets designed for babies and toddlers. Zoë was about five months old at the time, and she had never been in a swing before, so I put her in the cradle of the swing and pushed it gently. Immediately, this strange expression came over her face. Her eyes got really big, her mouth stretched out in a grimace, and she began to tremble. It was the first time I'd ever seen Zoë experience fear.

Of course, every one of us knows what fear is. We've all been in situations where we were nervous, scared, or downright terrified. None of us enjoy the experience of fear, but we recognize that it's necessary for our self-preservation. Fear is what keeps us from playing hopscotch on the freeway, from walking down the alley at night, from seeing just how close we can get our fingers to the blade of the band saw. On the other hand, fear is also what keeps us from asking out the girl we've had a crush on for years or from leaving the job we hate. Whether it's bad or good depends on context.

This is true of the Scriptural treatment of fear as well. There are places in the Bible where we are encouraged and indeed commanded to fear. In fact, the way that the word speaks of fear is more often positive than negative. However, this doesn't mean that we should always take counsel of our fears. Even though fear is necessary for the preservation of our souls, it is also something that can cost us our souls. It all depends on what we're afraid of and what we choose to do about it. This is something that we need to understand if we want to get to heaven. Let's turn our attention, then, to fear.

Whom Do We Fear?

Scripturally speaking, the most important thing about fear is whom we are afraid of. Jesus describes the way that we should think in Matthew 10:28. As with many of the proverbs of Jesus, this is an elliptical statement. In other words, the point is not that we should not fear the cars on the freeway and the men in the dark alleys and the teeth on the band saw. If we are truly fearless of anything that can destroy our bodies, our life expectancies will be very short!

Instead, Jesus is saying that we should fear those who can destroy the body less than we fear the One who can destroy both body and soul. God created us with the desire to preserve our life and well-being, but there are times when that desire will conflict with His commandments. When that happens, we must be willing to override our fear for our bodies and listen to the fear that we have for our souls. That's the only way our souls can stay protected.

This is not some abstract idea. This is a question we are constantly called on to answer. Do we fear God at all? Even if we do, do we fear Him more than we fear some earthly harm? Our destiny depends on what we fear the most.

The Effects of Ungodly Fear

If we are ruled by ungodly fear, this kind of fear is going to have several important effects in our lives. First, it will lead us to refuse to confess Christ. We see an example of this recorded in John 12:42. During the ministry of Jesus, even many of the high Jewish officials believed in Him, but the sect of the Pharisees had decreed that anyone who confessed Jesus and claimed to be His disciple would be put out of the synagogue. This was a big-time threat. If a Jew back then was put out of the synagogue, all of the righteous Jews would shun him. These men, even though they feared God, didn't fear Him enough. They were more afraid of consequences in this life than in the life to come.

Today, people refuse to confess Jesus for much the same reason. They're afraid of what will happen if they do. This can play out in any number of ways. Some refuse to become disciples at all. They may be in an unscriptural marriage, and they're afraid of losing that marriage, even though they believe. Others are afraid of leaving the family religion and enduring the anger of their relatives. However, this same fear can infect disciples too. They're worried that if they tell others about Jesus, their friends will reject them for being religious fanatics. They're worried that HR is going to come down on them if they're too loud about Christ in the workplace. As a result, these disciples, who had to confess Christ before men in order to be saved, now refuse to confess Him before other men because they are afraid.

Likewise, fear can lead us to refuse to work for the Lord. This was a problem that even Timothy struggled with, according to 2 Timothy 1:6-7. Obviously, we don't have miraculous spiritual gifts today like Timothy did 2000 years ago, but we can still wrestle with the same difficulty. Every one of us has gifts from God, talents and abilities that He expects us to use in His service. There are a lot of things that can keep us from being useful, but one of the most common is fear. We know that we could lead singing or preach a good sermon, but we let our fear of being in public keep us planted in the pew. We know that a shut-in doesn't receive many visitors, but we're afraid to go see him because we're worried that the visit will go all strange and creepy and awkward. We know that our neighbor would be receptive to the gospel, but we

never ask him to study with us because we're afraid we won't know what to say. In these areas and in many, many more, our fear can paralyze us and keep us from living up to our potential as workers in the church.

To us, it might seem like a good idea to listen to our fears, but in reality, fear can lead us to shrink back to destruction. The Hebrews writer warns us about this in Hebrews 10:38-39. The first-century Jewish Christians who were the original audience of Hebrews were in a tough spot. They were under tremendous pressure to return to the Law of Moses, and if they chose to remain true to Christ instead, it could cost them their wealth and even their lives. However, they had to remain faithful, because if they listened to their fear of such things, it would cost them their souls.

We need to beware of this soul-destroying fear in our own lives. Let's pick just one example. Jesus promises us in Matthew 10 that if we confess Him before men, He will confess us before the Father, but if we deny Him before men, He will deny us before the Father. What's this talking about? Is it talking only about confessing Jesus in the little chit-chat with the preacher in front of the baptistery, where everybody who can hear us is eager for us to make the good confession? Or is it talking about the opportunities we will have to confess Jesus throughout the rest of our Christian lives, sometimes in situations where we know people do NOT want to hear about Him? Hopefully, none of us would deny Him outright in such a position, but is silence any less of a denial? Is Jesus any more glorified if we simply say nothing at all? If we do deny Him, no matter how we do it, He's quite clear about what He will say about us.

The Effects of Godly Fear

However, just as fearing man more will have dramatic effects in our lives, so too will fearing God more. If we are ruled by godly fear, we will have humility. We see this in Romans 11:20-21. In context, here's what's going on: even though the gospel was first preached to the Jews, most people in the Jewish nation rejected it, and so the gospel was carried instead to the Gentiles, who did obey it. Paul's point is that the new Gentile Christians shouldn't make the same mistake that the Jews did. They shouldn't get so caught up in their special position as God's people that they neglect to believe and obey Him. Such pride would lead God to reject them too. Instead, they should learn humility from fear.

Likewise, even when we consider the ungodly around us, we too should be careful to be humble. We don't need to go around comparing ourselves to the drunk in the street, or the brother who only shows up once a month, or the sister who wears revealing clothing to church. That kind of comparison only leads to pride. Instead, we need to compare ourselves to the standard of the word, and be afraid when we see all the areas of our lives that don't measure up.

Second, godly fear will promote sincerity. Look at Paul's words in Colossians 3:22. This should govern our conduct first of all in the workplace. We shouldn't work hard only when we know our bosses are watching. We should work hard all the time because we know that God is always watching. In the same way, if we truly fear God, we will reject hypocrisy in every area of our spiritual lives. The Christian who is righteous in public but wicked in private doesn't have this godly fear. Instead, he truly only fears men, perhaps his brethren in Christ, perhaps his wife and the other members of his family. As far as he's concerned, if none of those people see him sin, he's gotten away with it. However, we can't ever get away with it with respect to God. He sees everything we do, and we must fear Him and be righteous always.

Third, godly fear will teach us to perfect our holiness. Paul raises this point in 2 Corinthians 7:1. As Christians, all of us face the temptation to coast, to be happy with our spiritual achievements right where we are, to give up on the time and effort needed for genuine spiritual growth. When we develop that good-enough attitude, we've forgotten the fear of God. In God's eyes, there has only been one person ever who was good enough, and that was Jesus Christ. When we are just as good as Jesus in every area of our lives, that's when we can sit back and coast. Until then, we are not good enough, and if we get complacent about our own spiritual position, God will surely condemn us for it. We need to fear that, brethren. We need to fear what God is going to do to His servants who have given up on working for Him.

Instead, we must constantly seek to make our holiness complete, day by day, month by month, year by year. We need to be aware of the sins we constantly wrestle with in our lives, we need to recognize the moments when we should do good and don't, we need to remember all the doors for service that we don't take advantage of, and we need to work on improving in all of those areas. Of course, we don't have to do it by ourselves. If we seek God's help through prayer, He will surely bless us in our efforts. However, that constant struggle for improvement is a vital part of God's plan.

Finally, and very reassuringly, godly fear will lead us to receive mercy. Consider Mary's thoughts about this, as recorded in Luke 1:49-50. Remember, friends: God doesn't only see the bad. If we honor God in our lives, if we hear the teachings of His word, if we constantly work to put those teachings into practice, God knows that about us too. We don't have to do that perfectly. In fact, the very reason why God sent Jesus to die for us is because He knew that we wouldn't do it perfectly. Grace is available to cover our shortcomings, but if we want to receive that grace, we must exhibit a holy fear of what will happen to us without it. We can never be righteous by our own efforts, but God still wants us to do our level best to be righteous anyway. He wants us to recognize the punishment that awaits those who don't make the effort. We must fear the justice of God, but even with that fear, we may find comfort in His mercy. We cannot justify ourselves, but He will justify us, and give us an eternal home with all those who have feared His name.