

The Fear of the Lord

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For a number of years it has been on my heart to deal with the subject of "The fear of the Lord." Though I have heard the fear of the Lord mentioned by a number of speakers and seen it mentioned in various writings, it is not a subject that is generally understood by the Christian church in these last days. I believe this lack of understanding is due, at least in part, to the inherent difficulty in teaching this subject in a balanced manner.

Let us begin by noting that Isaiah tells us even Jesus feared God:

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him--the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD--**and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.** (Emphasis added) (Is 11:2,3 NIV).

There is absolutely no question that we too are to fear God. (Indeed, if Jesus, the true Son of God, feared Him, how much more should we fear Him?) By "we" I include both believers and unbelievers alike. Let me list just a few scriptures directly on point:

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecc 12:13 NIV).

He gave them these orders:

"You must serve faithfully and whole heartedly in the fear of the LORD." (2 Chron 19:9 NIV).

The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble. (Prov 19:23 NIV).

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise. (Ps 111:10 NIV).

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (Prov 1:7 NIV).

The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. (Ps 19:9 NIV).

Obviously, given the scriptural commands to fear the Lord, and the knowledge that even Jesus delighted in the fear of the Lord, we Christians must develop a healthy and balanced fear of God.

The Fear of the Lord Defined

Webster's New World Dictionary defines fear as "respectful dread; awe; reverence." I believe all these are terms that apply to our fear of God.

There are what I will call "bad" kinds of fear. There is the fear of death, the fear of punishment, the fear of height, the fear of pain, and so on. All of these fears have a negative connotation and are therefore not appropriate to relate to the fear of the Lord. All these fears have a "bad thing" connected to them. Because the object of our fearing is the Lord God himself, there should be only good connected with this fear.

We know God loves us. Indeed, God is pure and perfect love itself. Thus we must define and balance the fear of the Lord with this divine and perfect love which God has for each one of us.

It is understandably difficult for the average Christian to understand how and/or why we should fear a God who is love personified. These two terms - fear and love - seem at odds with one another. I believe that once we understand "why" we should fear God, we can more readily see "how" we should fear Him. When we achieve this understanding we will see this rightly ordered fear within the context of His unconditional love for us.

Why Should We Fear God?

I am one of the very fortunate people who had a kind, gentle and loving father. Although it has been fifty years since my childhood, I can vividly recall my father's kind, loving smile and gentle touch. I remember the times when I was a small boy that he would take me with him to the fields to "help" him do his manly farm chores. I remember the warm sense of security when my family sat around a winter fire. Nothing could go wrong as long as my father was present. I loved my father deeply and trusted him implicitly. Never for a moment did he violate that love and trust.

But there was another side of my father. Disobedience to his rules or instructions incurred his discipline, and, at times, his wrath! He was always very willing to listen to my side of any situation and explain where I had gone wrong - then decree the punishment for the wrong deed. When I was a young child occasionally my wrong deed merited physical punishment from him. Before this punishment began, he would usually say,

"Son, this is going to hurt me more than it is you." Though I dared not talk back to him, my thoughts shouted, "That's IMPOSSIBLE! You don't know how much this hurts!"

But some of my friends' fathers never disciplined them. Growing up I sometimes envied them and thought they were so fortunate. "Imagine," I would think, "Their fathers love them so much they don't ever spank them." But my friends didn't appear to love and esteem their father, at least not as I did mine. That was a mystery to me.

As young boys there were times when we would decide to go someplace or do something that we knew we shouldn't. While the fear of my father's finding out often kept me from participating, the boys whose fathers never punished them had no fear whatever! It was indeed my father's discipline and the fear of incurring his wrath that kept me from much evil.

As I grew older, my responses to my own disobedience changed. I began to feel just awful when I failed my father. It hurt so much when I knew that I had disappointed him. Gradually the punishments ended. Yet I felt worse about disappointing my father than I did about the earlier punishment.

I also began to realize why my life didn't stray from my father's instructions. I still feared his discipline but I came to understand that it was his love that compelled him to discipline me. No matter the circumstances, there was never a moment when I didn't love my father. Nor was there ever a moment when I doubted my father's love for me.

As can be seen from the above illustration, I grew up through the appropriate progressive stages of maturing. As a very small child, I feared my father's physical punishment and discipline. As a small child the primary motive for my behavior was to avoid discipline. I was not yet mature enough in my understanding or love of my father to want to please him. As I matured my motivation for proper behavior shifted to my desire to please him and to my understanding that his rules were for my good.

It is the same way with our Christian growth. As "small children" spiritually, often our primary motive for "father pleasing" behavior is our fear of God and His punishments. And indeed, we should fear God and His wrath. We should understand His righteousness and holiness and the terrible discipline that can come to us from flaunting His commands.

And we know that God does discipline those in whom he delights:

My son, do not despise the LORD'S discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in. (Prov 3:11 NIV).

Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. (Heb 12:10 NIV).

What Happens When There Is No Fear of the Lord?

Some Christians believe that they may commit any sin they wish without suffering any consequences. They say, "God will forgive me...this isn't the 'unpardonable sin.'"

Once I was listening to a wise brother in the Lord teaching about the open sin among many of today's Christians. I have never forgotten his solemn declaration, "This is the curse of this generation: there is no fear of the Lord in them. Since they do not fear God, they erroneously think God doesn't care about their sin."

The absence of the fear of the Lord is a very grave matter because God cares very much about our sin. Scripture makes it very clear that the fear of the Lord is instrumental in keeping us from evil:

"...and he said to man, 'The fear of the Lord that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.'
(Job 28:28 NIV).

Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for;
through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil.
(Prov 16:6 NIV).

Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow. (Eccl 8:13 NIV).

God is telling us from these and many other scriptures that the lack of the fear of the Lord is instrumental in evil deeds and in the wicked.

But I label this motive or kind of fear of God as "second best." Guilt at doing wrong and/or fear of punishment are good reasons to behave properly, but they are not the BEST reasons for godly behavior. When our little children obey us because they are afraid to "get in trouble" we are pleased but we look forward to the day that they begin obeying us because they love us and want to please us.

Is our Heavenly Father any different in this regard? Certainly He is pleased when we shun evil and follow His commands because we don't want to suffer the consequences of His judgment. However, I believe our Heavenly Father is much more pleased when our love and devotion to Him compels godly behavior. Note that the resulting behavior is the same, but the motive has shifted from fear of personal consequences to our loving

and wanting to honor and please God.

A More Sanctified Fear of the Lord

To refer back to our earthly father/son relationship, once the son becomes an adult the two become equal. At that point the son loses his fear of his father and the father no longer has the right, the responsibility, or the authority, to discipline his son. The son still wants to please his father because of the mutual love, but not out of fear. The earthly son and father have become truly equal.

Not so with God! We never become equal with God. We can come into a fuller and fuller love and devotion of God, but we are to never lose our fear of God. Indeed, we are admonished to grow into an understanding of the fear of God as we grow in maturity in our Christian walk. This takes us to a deeper level of understanding of the fear of our Lord.

How We Learn to Rightly Fear God

The Psalmist wrote:

Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies. Turn from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. (Ps 34:11-14 NIV).

Here the writer of the psalm is telling us to

- keep our tongues from evil,
- keep our lips from speaking lies,
- turn from evil,
- do good,
- seek peace and pursue it.

And he opens by saying that it is by doing these things that we will be taught to fear God. Note the psalmist is telling us to become more sanctified and more holy! He tells us that this is the method by which we will learn the fear of God!

The writer of Proverbs also instructs us on how to come into an understanding of the fear of the Lord:

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. (Prov 2:1-5 NIV).

Here the writer of Proverbs is telling us to

- Store up my commands within you,
- Turn your ear to wisdom,
- Apply your heart to understanding,
- Call out for insight,
- Cry aloud for understanding,
- Look for it as for silver, and
- Search for it as for hidden treasure.

If we do all of these things, then we are assured that we "...will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God." Again, as we do the above, we will move into a more sanctified life, and then we will understand the fear of the Lord.

These two scriptures clearly imply that the more pure and holy we become, the more we will understand the fear of God.

But is it still the fear of personal punishment that is reflected here? No, I think not. The spiritually mature know they are saved, and, without pride, they know they have become more pleasing to God as they have matured.

But these same sanctified spiritual mothers and fathers in the Body of Christ also have a fuller knowledge and awareness of God's holiness, His righteousness, and His judgment on those who have turned their backs on Him and His Son, Jesus. Hence, these truly sanctified saints have a fuller fear of God, but it is not for their own person. Rather, it is for those individuals, those societies, and those nations who have rebelled against the living God!

We see this fear of God reflected in Moses when he said about Israel, "I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you." (Deut 9:19 NIV). Again, when Moses saw God's awesome display of power on the holy mountain he said, "I am trembling with fear." (Heb 12:21 NIV).

I believe we have a very clear scriptural reference to this mature understanding of the fear of God by the writer of Hebrews:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing

to fall into the hands of the living God." (Heb 10:26-31 NIV).

This is a truly awesome passage laying out a deep understanding of the consequences of turning one's back of the Lord. Certainly, when we absorb these verses to their fullest, we too must conclude that it is a dreadful thing to be judged and found guilty by God. Without doubt, it is a thing that we should fear for anyone!

Benefits of the Fear of the Lord

Just as surely as there are consequences for those who do not fear the Lord, so also are there great benefits for those who do fear the Lord. Let us look at some of these benefits:

The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble. (Prov 19:33 NIV).

Humility and the fear of the LORD brings wealth and honor and life. (Prov 22:4 NIV).

He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. (Ps 145:19 NIV)

The Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love. (Ps 147:11 NIV)

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him: As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, (Ps 103:11,13,17 NIV)

Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. (Mal 3:6 NIV).

This last verse from Malachi is awesome for it tells us that the Lord listens and hears those who fear Him. Just think of the power this has when those who fear the Lord gather together to pray and seek the Lord. And note, the second part of that verse tells us that a scroll of remembrance is written in the Lord's presence concerning those who fear Him and honor his name!

Finally, let us read what Acts tells us about the early church:

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. (Acts 9:31 NIV).

Are these words not a great encouragement as well as a command to us in today's church? As the church of Jesus Christ understands and lives in the fear of the Lord, we will be strengthened, encouraged by the Holy Spirit, grow in numbers, and enjoy a time of peace.

Let me conclude with Deuteronomy 10: 12 and 13:

"And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?"

Lord, Jesus, may it be so!

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