

Job 28:12-28; 23:8-17
Proverbs 9:10

FEAR GOD

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Why did Pharaoh let the Israelites leave Egypt? Was it the market research study? Was it the statistical analysis? Was it the appeal to Pharaoh’s humanitarian instincts? Was it an appeal to justice, or compassion? Pharaoh let the Israelites go because of fear. He was afraid of what God would do next if he did not let them go. Even so, Pharaoh recovered from his fear one last time, just long enough for one last disaster: the destruction of his army. Each time Pharaoh stopped fearing God, it was a prelude to folly. We may not want to see it or admit it, but losing fear of the Lord is a prelude to our folly as well.

Jonathan Edwards, reputed to be the greatest thinker to come out of Congregationalism, inquired of his congregation if they thought it was wrong to frighten a person out of a house on fire. Behind that question, he was of course claiming that it was a good thing to frighten people away from the fires of Hell. Even back in 1750, people were surprised that a man like Jonathan Edwards would support such crass and elemental approaches.

After the ordeal in Egypt, and after having the experience of being miraculously saved from the clutches of the greatest empire in the ancient world, and after the deliverance, safe at last from Pharaoh and his armies – in short, with such enormous proof of God’s favor and protection and caring and love – the reaction and result on the part of Israel was fear. *“Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. And Israel saw the great work which the LORD did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the LORD; and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.”* (Exodus 14:30-31)

That makes perfect sense to me. Yet I live in the midst of a people – “liberal Protestants” – which abhors the concept of fear. Or at least we abhor it if it has anything to do with religion or God. We like fear, use fear, try to apply fear in many other areas of life, but we do not want any of it around our churches. We are excessively proud that we are not a “fear-based religion.” That is the phrase I have heard over and over. Actually, the way it is meant, I often agree with it wholeheartedly. But there are also days when I get pretty nervous about the easy familiarity

with which we speak of our God. There is something deeply inappropriate, it seems to me, that so many of our people speak as if they can carry the Creator of the Universe around in their hip pocket, pull him out at their whim, instruct him about various affairs of state, and put him away again whenever his presence is awkward or inconvenient.

We do not want to fear God – we want to love God. That’s nice. I feel that way too. Yet sometimes it is good to introduce our *wants* to our *realities* and let them talk to each other and instruct each other. It is impossible not to notice that the churches that talk only about love – and never about fear – also lack obedience. I don’t think it ought to be that way, but it is that way. I don’t mean there are no exceptions, but in general the churches that have no “fear of the Lord” have very little obedience, and they are growing weaker and weaker and dying across the land.

The phrase “the fear of the Lord” appears twenty-seven times in the Bible (thirty in the NASB). Words appear over and over, of course, but not many phrases are repeated again and again. The “love of God,” for instance, appears nine times in the Bible. That’s a lot. (“His steadfast love endures for ever” appears forty-two times, but it is a poetic refrain in some of the psalms, and appears twenty-six times in the 136th Psalm alone.) I’m not trying to prove anything by just a word count, but the fact is that “THE FEAR OF THE LORD” is a huge concept in the Bible. It is foundational. I want to talk to you about it. But to get even a hearing, never mind agreement, I have to try to get through this enormous shield of prejudice that says there should not be any fear in religion.

ITEM: I am told again and again that love and fear cannot go together. I don’t know who started that rumor, but whoever it was never knew my father. I both loved and feared him. It seems to me that the two not only existed side by side, but often enhanced each other. Where I grew up, after the oranges had been picked, there were always a few left on the trees and lots on the ground. It was the season for orange fights. Hard oranges hurt more, but sometimes you could find one still firm enough to throw but with mold starting on one side, so you knew that when it hit, it would explode all over the target in a smelly, gooey mess. No snowball fight can compare to hitting the enemy with one of those. Anyway, for several days after the pickers had finished, we would all get off the school bus at someone’s house and have glorious orange fights. There were always rules to spoil the fun – especially at my house. One of them was, “No climbing on the roof.” Dad did not like to have to re-roof more often than necessary. But the barns and sheds were strategically

placed, and on our place they had very tempting roofs, especially when you were in an orange fight.

One Saturday morning, after a very fun afternoon the previous day, my father asked me if we had played on the roof. An idle question, of course. When you are young, it doesn't always occur that such a question would never be put if there were not some evidence. "No," I said. "We didn't play on the roof. We're not supposed to." Not news to him, that last part, but you have to keep these things clear. It was understood, in my family, that if we had friends over, we were responsible for their keeping all the rules *we* had to keep. So if anybody had been on the roof, I was just as guilty as if I had been on the roof myself. "Guilt" is another word most liberal Protestants don't know, so for the benefit of those who have not heard or used the word for many years, "guilty" is what you are when you have done something you should not have done.

Anyway, I lied. In the heat of the action, I myself had taken two steps across the corner of one roof to dive into the nearest tree. And several of my friends had run across the roof despite all my scolding. But no, we had not been on the roof. Maybe some of the oranges had landed on the roof in the midst of the fight, though it's unlikely that someone would throw oranges up on the roof if nobody was up there. My father did not mention any of that. But he asked me a second time. "No, we did not play on the roof." I can still taste that lie in my mouth. I hate it. My father did not question me further. He looked at me, turned, and walked away. He had an uncanny way of knowing when he had to pursue it and when I had to live with it. But hard as he was, he would never call me a liar because that is not what he wanted me to be.

I was very much afraid. I was afraid he would forbid me to have friends over again. I was afraid he would punish me for lying. I was afraid most of all because I had betrayed him, and how could I keep from losing his approval? And that was the most painful part of all because I loved him, and I needed him to love me. And you don't think fear and love have anything to do with each other? Where have you been? Are you not married? Have you no children? Have you no friends? Most of you would be more faithful to God if you were not so *afraid* to displease your spouse, your friends, your children, your boss. I am sometimes sorry about it, but like it or not, fear and love often go hand in hand.

ITEM: In First John, it says: "*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love.*" (I John 4:18-19) I guess that makes everything

I just said look pretty silly, doesn't it? But before you conclude that John was really stupid, let me remind you that John was talking about "confidence for the day of judgment." He is not talking about *all* fear in relationship with *all* love. He is talking about trusting God's love to save us on the day of judgment. When we truly know and trust God's love, all fear of going to Hell will leave us. Hallelujah! How I wish all of you believed that! How I wish all of you (and all of me) would hear and believe and experience what John was really talking about. But that does not imply that we should lose our respect for God's authority, or our fear of displeasing God, or our awareness that nothing can go right or be good in the long run if it goes against the will of God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That is one of the greatest precepts in the entire Bible. It is the first step – the way into the truly religious life. It says, quite simply, that the way onto the spiritual path is not by cultivating our own wisdom or thinking we are wise, or by concentrating on our own desires, exercising our own compassion, or thinking we can fight evil or bring justice by our own efforts and intelligence alone. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning* All true wisdom comes from focusing on God as the only true authority. Ultimately, we have no one else to please. Ultimately, we have no one else to fear. TO FEAR GOD LEAVES US NO TIME OR ROOM TO FEAR ANYTHING OR ANYONE ELSE. To fear God is to trade all our other fears for this authentic and appropriate fear. A person can meditate on that for months without a moment of boredom. And it is true: every fear we find within ourselves is a maverick, a leftover stowaway from a place where we have not yet learned to fear God instead.

Every spiritual path on the face of the earth has a first step which must be taken, or people cannot enter the Way or walk the Path. That first step, in some fashion, always calls us to give up on ourselves. That giving up on ourselves opens the way for us to turn our willfulness, our plans, our desires, and our lives over to God. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" *means* we have stopped being our own authority, our own boss. We have stopped looking to the people around us for true authority. We have stopped being most concerned with pleasing ourselves or with gaining some earthly toy or pleasure. We have even stopped trying to do good in the ways that keep us as the monitors and judges of what that really means. God is the center. God is the focus. God is the source. All we want is to please and obey God. All we fear is to be against or out of God's will. It is the humility step. We give up our own authority and wisdom, and turn to God. We even give up our pride that we can walk in God's ways by our own strength and merit alone.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Apart from You, O God, I am lost, and can accomplish nothing.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus outlines the steps of His own “program.” They are called the Beatitudes. What is the first step? “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” (Matthew 5:3) That always throws us Americans at first. It cannot be right; we are supposed to be rich in spirit, strong in spirit, confident and well-developed in spirit. That is our natural assumption, and it reveals our underlying attitude. By the way, this first step puts you into the Kingdom. It is not the promise of a future reward. It is not a thing we accomplish if we do it well enough for long enough. “*Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” Present tense and immediate. This first step is all it takes to get in. It is not the end of the story, only the beginning; there are endless wonders to follow. Nevertheless, this first step gets us into the Kingdom and onto the Path. And the first step is HUMILITY. The poor in spirit know their absolute and utter need of God. They have no confidence left in themselves alone. Same step, different words.

What is the first step of the twelve-step program? “Admitted that we were powerless ... that our lives had become unmanageable.” Oh sure, I can do things, but they never come out right – they never accomplish what I hoped for or cared about. Same step, different words: *the fear of the Lord ... blessed are the poor in spirit ... by myself I am powerless.* From ancient roots to modern times, it is the entryway into New Life.

I think it’s a shame if we do not know that our own heritage – our own tradition – is authentic and powerful and knows what it’s talking about. So I wanted to mention these things to you. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*

Most of us are aware that we no longer live in a God-fearing nation. If that is true, and if our religious precepts are true, then our nation is no longer wise – it does not follow the ways of wisdom – and is, in fact, heading toward Pharaoh’s folly. While things may be going well for some of us from time to time, we know that a nation that no longer seeks God’s will cannot long maintain a way of life worth having. Between overpopulation, ecological ruin, the threat of war, and escalating terrorist activities, it is sometimes difficult to be optimistic about the future. Bringing a desirable quality of life to as many people as possible requires the combined cooperative efforts on the part of most of the world. Only a God-fearing world could come up with such behavior – a world devoted to serving God beyond its own whims, prejudices, or visions of momentary self-interest.

This is nothing new. Yet I believe in the quiet, steady, spirit-filled influence of authentic spiritual communities, where individuals try to obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit on a daily basis – and where they never forget that salvation is God’s problem and God’s purpose, and that we are only servants, not designers or dictators. We do the best we can, where we find ourselves, but the real church has *always* felt like a stranger in a strange land. So has every other authentic spiritual community in any of the world’s great religions. This world is not our home – it is only a training ground through which we pass. So we learn as much as we can in whatever time we have, and help each other as much as we are able to along the way, insofar as we are given any resources or wisdom to do so.

So we find peace with God, even if we do not find peace with the world. The fear of the Lord is the way to personal peace. It has nothing to do with absence of conflict or how well things seem to be going out on the surface of life. But if we have not walked in the fear of the Lord, we will not hear or fathom or understand the Christ of God when He comes to introduce us to forgiveness and mercy and love.

Having come this far, maybe I can entice a few more of you to see why the Christian church seems so much more exciting and so much more crucial to me than it does to some of you. (Not all of you, but some of you.)

Like many of you, I have lived too many of my years caught somewhere in the backwash between the Christian Gospel and the Acceptance School of psychology. In this backwash, we accept people as they are, try to love them unconditionally, grant them freedom to make their choices and mistakes, and then stand back trusting that their inner goodness will prevail – even if nobody has ever bothered to teach them anything about God, justice, mercy, repentance, salvation, or Jesus Christ. Am I being too gentle? I’m not asking you to agree; I just want to make sure you can follow the drift if you want to.

It is true that we are created by a good God. Is it also true, therefore, that we always “do the best we can with what we know and where we are”? Is SIN merely an aberration that can be healed with sufficient knowledge, patience, and affirmation? People have tried to tell me so for years. The books that say so are countless. Many of the policies of the institutions of our society are built on these assumptions. Furthermore, individuals are not responsible for their actions – personal responsibility is old-fashioned. It went out with the notion that God created us with

personal purpose and destiny, and that our hope was individual conversion – awakening to the presence of God in our lives, and moving toward our true purpose with God’s guidance and help. That is not “in vogue” anymore. (Neither is use of the word “vogue,” for that matter.) In any case, today the constant message is that society is responsible for warping individuals. The only hope is to reform and perfect the society. If we create the proper environment, people will just naturally flow into goodness and love because there is no real sin or evil or Satan. We just need acceptance and unconditional love.

Part of God’s design is “freedom of choice.” We all “try on” rebelliousness, sooner or later; we try to have things our own way rather than God’s way. Some of us learn to do that very subtly, even sometimes behind a veneer of saintliness. You do not have to look evil to BE evil. And if we stay rebellious long enough, the spike enters the soul. Sometimes being kind, understanding, affirming, and forgiving is spiritual murder – a mask for our not really caring enough to put ourselves on the line for what we believe.

Love is *never* unconditional! God creates with conditions that will not be changed for anybody. Without repentance, forgiveness cannot operate and will not take effect. Without discipline and devotion, nothing is achieved. God may never turn his back on us, but if we stay turned away from God, we will go from bad to worse and die. Sometimes love says, “Despite all your offenses against the holy laws – against fairness, justice, caring, compassion – despite it all, I choose to stay with you and to go on hoping and praying for your awakening.” But love never says, “There are no rules. Whatever you do is fine with me. I accept and affirm you regardless.” That is not love. That is hatred. Have you ever read *Pinocchio*? When does Pinocchio start making an ass of himself? When everyone around him says, “Do anything you want to.”

Sometimes love says, “I have tried to believe in you, I have gone on forgiving, but you do not repent or change. I have to leave you because you are using my caring to support your sin and death.” (“*Shake the dust Do not cast your pearls before swine or give dogs what is holy.*” Yes, Jesus said those things too! “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*”)

About fifteen years ago, my family and relatives and some of my best friends put their love for me on the line and said, “If you don’t get help and stop drinking, we are leaving you, we are through with you.” I did not like that very much. It did not seem fair or just, never mind

forgiving or accepting. As for unconditional, not a trace! The conditions were spelled out in detail and unalterably. It is doubtless my aberration, but it is honest: Not one of the people involved, with the possible exception of my sister, had done as much for me as I had done for them. So they were not saying, “You have not lived up to our demands and expectations.” They were saying, “We are no longer willing to stand by and watch you destroy yourself. We love you too much to do that any longer.”

Quite a long time afterward, when some of the dust had cleared and I was living a very different and much happier life, I tried to process what had happened. It was clear to me that a key piece in my theology had been ripped away and replaced by something quite different. People had treated me against all the precepts of unconditional love, and it saved me years of pain and anguish, if not my very life. It was hard for me not to conclude that the typical precepts of unconditional love were terribly and dangerously wrong. Moreover, I was aware that my own work with others was moving away from such assumptions – and change and hope and joy were happening faster and deeper than they ever had before.

So I need to mention this to you, not just by inference, but directly: The liberal church in most places today is off-course. It is too soft, unconditional, aimless, and covenantless. We have forgotten how to be accountable to each other; how to care together; how to believe that it really matters when we head for destruction or go against everything the church stands for and believes in. It is time to return to the fear of the Lord – and to wisdom, to God’s conditions, and to fellowship bonds that mean genuine affection and purpose, even at the risk of relationship itself. It is not enough, among Christians, to just “live and let live” – to just agree that “I won’t tell on you if you won’t tell on me.” Some of the counterfeit acceptance and forgiveness and good will masquerading as love in our day is killing people.

If there were no conditions, forgiveness would be irrelevant. If forgiveness were as easy or automatic as our generation has tried to pretend, there would never have been a Cross. Unconditional love leaves us with very little appreciation and no true gratitude. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a stamp of approval. It is salvation: deliverance from sin, death, and the Devil.