

## Fear God

I'm excited to have my dad here visiting with me this morning. Many of you all know that I don't follow a ton of sports, but I DO enjoy playing sports. Back in the day I was actually pretty into football, track, and cross country - all of which my dad helped coach me in.

One of the best things my dad ever taught me was that there's really only 2 things you need to succeed in anything - want to and know how.

And he said, I can teach you the "know how" part - but you gotta bring the "want to."

That obviously applies in sports and any other physical challenge we might undertake - but it's true in our journey with Christ as well.

As we start into the new year, this week we're beginning a new sermon series called BASICS - revisiting some of the basic building blocks for our faith. This is a perfect opportunity for folks feeling the desire to explore faith, as well as those eager to recommit themselves and take their faith more seriously.

Now, life with Christ isn't football. I'd hope that's obvious.

It isn't a task to be accomplished - it's a relationship. But like all relationships, it does require effort on our part to engage, nurture, grow, and live into.

Life with Christ isn't passive. It's only possible because of God's initiative in salvation, but what we do with that gift has very real implications for our impact in His kingdom.

If you're sitting here this morning wondering how to invest more deeply in your spiritual life - I'll tell you this:

I can teach you the "know how" but you gotta bring the "want to."

So, if you "want to" - would you pray with me this morning?

Lydia and I were looking for something to watch on Netflix the other night and we came across a movie called *Birdbox* - maybe you've heard of it. We both kept seeing people mention it online, so I thought I'd pull up the trailer for us to see if we might be interested - we literally knew nothing about it.

Turns out it's about some mom and her kids going on some harrowing journey blindfolded to run from some kind of creatures that make you want to hurt yourself if you see them.

At least that's what I got from the trailer and the little bit I watched on my own - we can't watch it together, cause Lydia HATES scary movies, and this one was even worse cause it involved a mom and her kids.

She's like, "Why would I INTENTIONALLY make myself scared? That just sounds like the worst"

Some people - like me - enjoy the thrill of those kinds of movies.

It can provide an opportunity for thrill and tension in a more controlled form - and generally with a sense of resolution at the end.

Fear is an interesting emotion:

- It CAN be a good thing, inasmuch as it guides us to avoid things that are dangerous.
- But it's precisely because of that unpleasant feeling that keeps us from harm that we typically try to avoid it as much as possible.

That's what makes it so intriguing that scripture tells us that the starting point for cultivating wisdom is NOT love, nor faith, nor hope, nor any positive response we might generally think of...

Proverbs 9:10 tells us that "*The FEAR of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*"

One of the FIRST basic building blocks of our faith is to FEAR GOD.

That's a disturbing concept for some. I mean, Jesus tells us that the GREATEST commandment is to LOVE God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

If our greatest purpose is to love God, then why would wisdom start with fearing God?

Can you truly love someone you're afraid of? For that very reason, some suggest it's better for us to redefine fear in this case as a sort of awe and reverence.

But it's really not that simple.

God seems to appear to folks in scripture in all sorts of ways that illicit a response far beyond mere awe and reverence.

- Adam and Eve hid from God because they were afraid after they'd sinned.
- Virtually every messenger of God has to start with "Fear not" because their very appearance seems to generate that response.

→ When God is about to give the law to Moses at Mount Sinai - the initial plan was for the Israelites to be close enough to the mountain that they could hear as well, but when they witness the thunder and lightning with the smoke around the mountain and His voice like a booming trumpet sound, they get scared and say, "Y'know actually, Moses you'll probably take better notes anyway, maybe you should just go and tell us what He says"

Every single time that someone encounters the Lord in scripture - their initial response is to fall on their face in fear.

It's not like it's a conscious choice. It just happens. It's a visceral, emotional response.

YOU CAN'T LOGIC YOUR WAY INTO FEAR OF THE LORD. It just happens.

You can respect the idea of God. You can obey His commands out of a sense of duty or desire for reward.

But REAL fear of the Lord that produces REAL wisdom comes from an encounter and experience with the Holy God. It requires a willingness to know God. Really know Him.

This fear we're talking about is the natural response to finite, broken, sinful, guilty creatures before an infinite, whole, holy, and just Creator.

Like a mouse next to a lion, one is completely at the mercy of the other.

The GOOD NEWS is that our infinite, matchless, holy and perfect God has revealed Himself to be good, compassionate, kind, forgiving, and wonderfully merciful.

But we shouldn't let our comfort in His mercy allow us to forget His terrifying might. Because the Bible tells us that this holy fear is actually a crucial piece of our faith formation and the journey toward wisdom.

That's because I. WHAT YOU FEAR DETERMINES WHAT YOU KNOW.

We've got data now that shows us that people make the majority of their decisions based on emotions and gut instincts - not reason or logic.

Even now, some of you are like, "Yeah, I trust you, sounds right" and others are like, "Nuh uh!"

Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt describes this using the analogy of a rider on an elephant. our emotions are like an elephant, and reason is a rider perched on top. Most of our decisions are gut reactions, our intuition as strong and unwieldy as an elephant.

Our reasoning comes later to justify our decisions, and only through hard work can the rider get the elephant to switch directions. Even if we're confronted with new evidence that directly refutes our position, we still want to be like, "Yeah, but this FEELS right..."

Most of our gut reactions to the world around us are responses born from our experiences, our commitments, our desires, and our fears.

This is partially why talking about things like politics and religion can be so sensitive and volatile. Our opinions in these areas aren't just neutral beliefs - they're often have deep emotional connections.

And what more powerful emotional motivator is there than fear?

That's why so many authoritarian leaders deal exclusively in fear tactics.

That's also why so many revolutionaries fight against fear.

- Karl Marx railed against religion because he saw it as a fear-based opiate of the masses. Create a false fear and a solution to pacify the people.
- In much more optimistic view, FDR famously said that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself - that nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

Regrettably, the Church has in the past - sometimes still today - used the bully pulpit to try and scare people into the pews, out of hell, and into heaven.

Don't rock the boat. Fall in line, and don't ask too many questions. And while you're at it, make sure you tithe your 10%.

But the Fear of the Lord that scripture teaches is not a pacifying nor a paralyzing fear. It's a liberating fear.

Because when come to understand the fearsome might of God as Creator and Judge - every other thing you *could* fear comes into proper perspective.

## II. FEAR OF THE LORD LIBERATES US FROM FEAR OF THE WORLD.

There's a great example of this at the beginning of the book of Exodus. Jacob and his 12 sons had ended up settling in Egypt for a time after a major famine hit and one of the brothers, Joseph, had miraculously risen to a place of favor in Egypt with God's help and saved the nation and the surrounding peoples.

But as time went on and this family grew into a clan and then a rapidly growing subcommunity in Egypt, a new pharaoh decided they were too dangerous and needed to be enslaved and kept under control.

#### READING

Exodus 1:<sup>15</sup> The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, <sup>16</sup> “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.”

[It would've been understandable for them to fear what would happen if they disobeyed]

<sup>17</sup> The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup> Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”

<sup>19</sup> The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”

<sup>20</sup> So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. <sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

These midwives feared God more than they feared what any earthly ruler could do to them. And that fear gave them the inner motivation and strength to defy his orders, even at personal risk.

This is what's at the heart of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 10 when he sends out disciples to do ministry. He says he's sending them out like sheep among wolves - and there WILL be people who mean them harm. But he goes on to say...

Matthew 10:<sup>28</sup> “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

I'll note here though that Jesus is not using this as a threat. It's an encouragement.

Jesus isn't saying - “hellfire is awaiting those on God's bad side, so you'd better straighten up and fly right!”

Jesus IS saying - “Those who stand against you may have some power to inflict temporary pain on you, but God has a power and authority that is far greater than any of theirs.”

And he follows up with good news, because the God who can destroy both soul and body is the SAME God who is literally the embodiment of perfect and unfailing love.

Jesus immediately goes on to say:

<sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. <sup>30</sup> And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup> So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

It's important to note that Fear of the Lord is described as the *beginning* of wisdom, not necessarily the end game. Fear of God implies an appropriate understanding of our relation to God as finite, broken beings before our infinite, Holy Creator. But the Gospel from OT to NT shows us that the Lord has been committed to our good in faithfulness and lovingkindness from the outset.

### III. FEAR IS THE BEGINNING of wisdom, BUT LOVE IS THE END

1 John 4:18 tells us that perfect love casts out fear. Fear has to do with punishment, but Christ has already proven that there is no longer any condemnation for those that receive Him.

We don't have to be afraid of anything else the world could throw at us, because God is the biggest most fearsome being there could be - and He is on your side! He's committed to your good as long as you'll have Him.

In the famous words of Bob and Junior from VeggieTales: God is bigger than the Boogeyman, and He's watching out for you and me!

He's made the highest heights and the deepest depths.

He set the universe upon its foundations.

He made mammoths and whales, and creatures we don't even know about in the depths of the ocean.

He's got thunder in His footsteps and lightning in His fists.

He's got heavenly storehouses laden with snow.

He can speak worlds into being and wipe them out with a single word.

He's got nail pierced hands, and a thorn pierced brow - because somehow...somehow all of that wasn't enough for us.

We exchanged fear of the Lord for fear of man and we took all of that fear and threw it in His face as we cried crucify Him.

And in humility - the Maker of life laid down His own just to prove to us that death couldn't hold Him.

There is NOTHING that can hold Him.

There is NOTHING that can keep His love from us..."Rom 8:<sup>38</sup> neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

## SO WHAT?

Should you fear God? How can you not?

If you don't fear God, you've never met Him. Or worse, you've forgotten Him and traded your God in for a more palatable replacement.

Because the God I know, the God of the Bible is glory. There is a power in His presence that simply demands conviction and repentance.

There's grace and compassion - the most wonderful gift of His forgiveness. But that doesn't nullify His strength and glory.

There's only one way to really cultivate a Fear of the Lord that will produce wisdom, and that's to seek His face. You can't logic your way into it.

You have to meet Him and to feel the glory of His presence. Way better to do that now than on judgment day.

If you seek Him wholeheartedly, you will find Him - maybe not in the way you expect. And you'll experience the both the weight of His glory and the tenderness of His love.

Can you really love someone you fear? Yes, unequivocally yes.

I'd actually ask, can you really love someone you DON'T fear? If you don't fear the one you love, it means you've not given them any ability to wound you. You've withheld your heart from them.

To truly love someone is to give them the ability to wreck your heart, trusting that they'll cherish it instead.

Lydia and I had a moment around the time of our anniversary - not really a fight - more of a disappointment of expectations, mostly on my part. And it was obvious we needed to talk and process through it.

Lydia, being the internal processor she is and also being the good mom she is needed to take her time to think things through while getting kids down to bed.

I, being the external processor I am and the worry wart I am, spent the time helping in silence and trying to prepare myself for the conversation.

Honestly, there was a part of me that was petrified. Maybe this was it. Maybe she's finally realized how ridiculous her choice to marry me was and she's going to leave. Maybe she's going to lay out all of the ways I've not measured up in this marriage that she's been holding back and not telling me these last 4 years. Maybe what I thought was happiness was all a sham.

That terror was in there because (1) I'm a little messed up and go to the worst possible scenario way too quick, but (2) because I've given her the ability to hurt me that way. I have let my guard down enough to trust her with that vulnerable part of myself.

But WHILE that terror was present, there was a much more pervasive sense of calm and trust.

I know my wife. I know she loves me, and I know she's not the kind of person to withhold things from me if she's unhappy. And I knew that whatever she had to say, we'd get through it, because that's what we do.

And we did. We talked, and it turned out to really not be that big of a deal by the way. Significant, because all things are in marriage, but small in the grand scheme of things. And we both felt even closer after the fact.

And that was just with my wife - who, although she's practically perfect in every way, she's still human, flawed, and vulnerable herself.

Can we really claim to love a holy God without an appropriate sense of fear and trembling - a humbling of ourselves to give Him our hearts at our most vulnerable and tender?

The reality is: We ALL fear something - and that fear orders our affections and drives much of the decisions we make, often without us even knowing it.

What do you fear? Who do you fear?  
Is it worth it?