

***“kNOw Fear; Facing Life’s Phobias—The Fear of God”***

We’ve been talking about fear for several weeks now in this series. The fear of the future, the fear of commitment, the fear of failure, the fear of loneliness. One theme has been that fear is a part of life and that won’t change. But that with God’s help, fear can mobilize us rather than paralyze us. Fear can be a great mobilizer, a great motivator.

We all live with some element of fear. I have fear every week when I stand up in front of you. And this is just the culmination of fears I have through the week. On Tuesdays I do most of my message preparation and I wake up with a little fear every Tuesday morning and that fear stays with me all day. That fear builds through the week, especially as I sit down again on Thursday to take the message to the next level and get the study guide ready. The fear swells on Saturday when I go over the message and bring it all together in my head, and it peaks early Sunday morning when I get up at about 5a.m. to really get it locked in to my heart and head. Fear.

It’s the fear of saying something on God’s behalf, the fear of being a conduit for his truth, the fear of messing that up! That’s why I get very nervous every time I talk. I understand that the stakes are sky high. Because on any given Sunday, there’s a marriage here teetering on disaster, a family checking out Saint Paul’s for the first time, somebody who’s far away from God giving Christianity one last shot, a business person trying to process a life-changing decision, some loved ones dealing with the loss of a family member. All those things are bouncing around in my head and it causes fear. To boil it down, the fear I deal with is the fear of God.

Maybe some of you can relate to that. Others of you are saying, “I don’t get it. What’s up with this fear of God stuff?” Good question. The fear of God is one of the most misunderstood concepts in all of the Bible. But I really believe that we can figure this out, understand it and gain some life-power as we do.

Before we go further let’s get a working concept, a biblical concept of the fear of God. **“Fear of God is reverence and awe at the power, majesty, and holiness of God Almighty.”** The idea is reverence and awe at the power, majesty, and holiness of God Almighty. In Ed Young’s words, “It’s not an emotional quiver-in-your-liver type of fear. It’s not a bug-eyed, gape-mouthed, screaming-at-the-top-of-your-lungs-with-fright type of fear. Fear of God is not a boogeyman waiting around the corner to say ‘Boo’ and scare us out of our minds. The fear talked about in the Bible is simply an understanding of who God is in relation to us... the idea is reverence and awe at the power, majesty, and holiness of God Almighty”

The central idea of the fear of God is a fear of grieving, or disappointing the God we’ve chosen to serve and love. It’s about a reverence for God and a deep desire to please him. The motivation for avoiding sin is not the fear of punishment, but our love for God.

Let start to get a handle on the concept of the fear of God by looking at Proverbs 1:7. It says, **“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7, NIV)**. In other words, the fear of the Lord is the starting point, the launching pad, for knowledge. I think most of us want knowledge, most of us desire wisdom. It is all tethered to the fear of the Lord—having awe and reverence at who God is.

Now one of the reasons why we’re foggy and muddy about this concept is because we get our views of our Heavenly Father from the views and the cues we received from our earthly fathers. If your dad was all about rules and regulations, and you knew that if you broke the rules he was going to drop the hammer you. If your dad was like that, chances are you see God in the same way, unapproachable, always saying, “Halt, stop, don’t vex me boy, don’t make me angry!” And a lot of people say to themselves, I don’t want any part of a God like my father.

Others have dad’s at the opposite end of the spectrum. Anything and everything was OK. No boundaries, no guidelines, no structure, no problems. Chances are if you grew up in a household like that you see God like that. You don’t really have a fear of him. You think that God doesn’t really have any guidelines or boundaries for your life. Just go for it. Just do life. Follow your feelings.

Others people grew up in a household somewhere in between. Your dad gave you some boundaries and some freedom. That's the kind of house I grew up in. If that's the kind of role model you had, you probably see God in the same way, giving structure and freedom at the same time.

Other people grew up in a household where you didn't have a father or if you had one he was rarely around. Or you had an abusive father. And for you, your concept of God is up for grabs. You could have an unhealthy fear of God or no fear of him. You are kind of out there in never-never land.

So today we are going to go on a fear finding mission. We need to recover a healthy fear of God. One powerful passage of scripture comes from 1 John. It says this, **"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:18-19, NIV).**

Perfect love drives out fear. In other words, we should not fear the future. We should not fear commitment. We should not fear failure. We should not fear loneliness. We should only fear God. If we fear God, we should not fear anything else. He is the only thing worthy of our fear.

This happens through recognition. **"A healthy fear of God is about recognition"** Recognition is an aspect of fearing God, a healthy one at that.

After the last lunch with the pastor I was talking to one person for a few minutes. And I said, "Now tell me, do you go by Pamela or Pam." She was so kind, she looked at me and said, "My name is Sandy." Recognizing someone is very important. We've got to do that with God. We've got to recognize who God is. It's very important that we recognize how much God loves us. Because we must find a healthy balance between love and fear. Between love and fear.

You see, certain things are inseparably linked in life today. Chips and salsa, cookies and milk, money and Bill Gates, teenagers and body piercing. Those things are inseparably linked. So are love and fear. Psalm 33:18, **"The eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love. Let those who fear the LORD say his love endures forever" (Psalm 33:18, NIV).** Fear and love. Fear and love are balanced.

Question: When was the last time you jumped on a seesaw? I think it was last Summer that Zoe and I got on one. She's on one side weighing in at about 45 pounds. I was on the other, at about 180. If I wanted to I could have sat down hard on the seesaw and launched her out of the confines of the playground. A lot of us have an out-of-balance seesaw. We don't recognize who God is and we don't recognize the critical balance between fear and love. If we fall too far on the fear side, we become legalistic. "Can't smoke, can't cuss, can't chew, can't run around with people who do. Christianity is a bunch of rituals and regulations. I've got to jump through this hoop, I have got to do this and do that. God might hit me with a heavenly hammer. Bad boy, bad boy, what's ya gonna do?" A lot of people are on this legalistic trip. But Christianity is not a legalistic trip, it is a relationship.

On the other hand we can get the seesaw going so far on the love side that we mess up. We think that because God loves us unconditionally it doesn't matter how we live. "Well, I can just have sex with this person and that person. I can get wasted on the weekends. I can bend the truth. I can take advantage of people. God just loves me." Yes, God does love us unconditionally, but it is fear tethered to love. Fear (awe and reverence for God's power and majesty) connected to love. And if we fall too far on the love side, we get all lackadaisical and just cruise in our Christianity. That is not it. It is the perfect balance between fear and love. Fear and love, see the balance there. When I recognize who God is, I understand that God is God and I am not. I understand the delicate balance between fear and love.

Another aspect of fearing God in a healthy, a biblical way, is accountability. This also has a lot to do with love. **"A healthy fear of God is about accountability"**. Think about tax time. That date we love to hate, April 15. We have to come clean before our government. We have got to give an account of our finances. And April 15 messes with us, doesn't it? We could file extensions, go through a number of gymnastics and a lot of rigmarole, but at the end of the day we are going to have to face the music. April 15 financially really influences how I will spend, save, and invest my money. God, in his economy, has an April 15. He has a day of accountability. God's April 15, the day of accountability, has a big influence on how I will

spend and invest my one and only life. The Bible says that one day I will stand before him and I will have to give an account.

If you are a Christ-follower, you will have to give an account before God. I am not referring to any punishment. Our punishment was taken on the shoulders of Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago. Our sins were forgiven and forgotten, past, present, and future. I am talking about, though, a healthy accountability. The writer of Hebrews put this spin on it inspired by the Holy Spirit. **“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account” (Hebrews 4:13, NIV).** We must give an account. And this healthy accountability motivates me to live a pure and holy and avoid sin. I still mess up. I strike out. I fumble and stumble. I am always thinking, though, about that accountability. Because I don’t want to disappoint the one I love!

I have a skill set given to me by God which I know I have and you have a skill set given to you by God which you know you have, and I don’t use mine and you don’t use yours, we’re going to be held accountable for that. I try to live a life reflective of God’s character because I don’t want to disappoint him. I don’t want to get to the end of my life and look at God on April 15 and say, “You know, I tried. But I got busy. I was involved in this and that...” Jesus said this, **“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48, NIV).** I try to live a life that puts what I’ve been given to use because I don’t want to disappoint Jesus when I stand face to face with him. He already took my punishment for my sins. So punishment isn’t the motivation. I just don’t want to disappoint him when he asks me, “So, tell me Aaron, what did you do with what I gave you?” That aspect of fear, accountability, is a healthy part of the fear of God. It’s really pretty simple.

You see, Christianity is not a complicated thing. People have tried to make it complicated. It is not. Is being in good physical condition complex? No. It is simple. You want to know how to be in great shape? I will tell you right here. Eat healthy. Do some aerobic exercise three to five times a week. Do some weight lifting. That’s all it takes. Easy to explain. Easy to implement? No. No. It is one of the most difficult things I have tried to do.

Christianity is the same thing. Is this stuff ethereal, out there, complex? No. It is simple, not shallow or superficial. It is simple, knowing God loves you, knowing you’ve blown it, knowing God’s done something to forgive you, and knowing that you have to make the choice. It’s simple, but it takes everything you have. And the great news is, we have someone in our lives once we step over the line to give us the strength and the power to do this stuff.

I want to share with you a few fringe benefits of a healthy fear of God.

First, direction. **“Benefits of a healthy fear of God: Direction** Psalm 25:12 puts it this way, **“Who is the man who fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way he should choose” (Psalm 25:12, NIV).** Having awe and reverence for God’s power and majesty leads us to a place where we get answers to questions like, “What do I do next? What is the best choice for me here? How can I get around this problem?”

Then there’s God’s compassion. **“Compassion”** Psalm 103:13, **“As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him” (Psalm 103:13, NIV).** When we have a healthy fear of God, when we recognize that God is God and we are not, when we stand in awe and reverence of his power, his love, his majesty, then we experience his compassion—his love, his deep concern.

Then there are blessings. **“Blessings”** Proverbs 22:4, **“The reward of humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, honor and life” (Proverbs 22:4, NIV).** The opposite of pride is humility. God has no tolerance for pride, but he rewards humility in tangible and spiritual ways. Jesus put it this way, **“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45, NIV).** This healthy fear we’ve been talking about leads us to be humble and humility opens the doors to blessings. When we commit our lives to God, recognize who he is and his love for us, and submit to his accountability, we’re humbling ourselves before him and God rewards that. The problem is that if you think you have it, you probably don’t! If you’re trying to manufacture Christian humility in order to get God’s blessings, you probably won’t find true humility!

Another benefit of a healthy fear of God is contentment. **“Contentment”** Psalm 34:9-10, **“Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing” (Ps 34:9-10, NIV)**. How does fear of God bring contentment? It’s all about priorities. When God has first place in our lives, when we have put nothing else in front of him, then everything else falls into place. And when that happens we find true contentment. Jesus said, **“Seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33, NIV)**. Recognize God, have this healthy fear, and life comes into balance and that brings real, lasting contentment.

The fear of God is the only fear we are commanded to have. This fear is not a cowering fear, a shivering fear. It’s to stand in awe and reverence of the God of the universe. It’s to fall in love with him and experience his love for us. This fear is to experience that love so powerfully that you do not want to disappoint the lover of your soul, that you become a willing warrior for him, that when you’re held accountable for your one and only life, you hold your head up high because you did your best to be obedient. The fear of God is not a fear of punishment, it’s awe and reverence in the presence of God’s power and love.

And here is the most ironic thing, having this fear of God actually makes us fearless in the face of everything else. When you fear God, you don’t need to fear anyone or anything. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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