

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE FEAR OF GOD

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In his first inaugural address in 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously said: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” He did not mean that fear of any and every kind is always to be rejected and fought against with every weapon at our disposal. Sometimes fear is a good thing. A healthy fear of fire, for example, will deter one from running into a burning building.

A fear of punishment is also a powerful deterrent to doing evil or disobeying the law. Jim Elliot, one of five American missionaries martyred in Ecuador in 1956, wrote in his journal of his awareness of “two great forces for good in human experience: the *fear* of God and the *grace* of God. Without the fear of God,” he wrote, “I should not stop at doing evil; the fear of God restrains from evil. Without the grace of God,” he said, “I should have no desire to approach positive goodness. The one is a deterrent from evil; the other an encouragement to good.”

It is intuitively obvious, I think, that fear sometimes serves a positive purpose. The kind of fear President Roosevelt had in mind was the generalized, irrational, unjustified sense of fearfulness or terror that can paralyze us and prevent us from taking wise action in any situation. When fear has this kind of effect on a person or a family or a church or a people, it is obviously not a good thing. Ralph Waldo Emerson may have been right when he said that “fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world.”

The Bible tells us again and again not to live in fear nor allow our fears to overwhelm us or paralyze us. Again and again, God says to us: “Do not fear.” Because of the riches of God’s mercy and love to us – the mercy and love He showed us in Jesus Christ His Son – there is no longer any need for us to cower in fear before God. There is no reason for us to try to hide from God. There is no reason for us to be terrified of God or to fear the fury of His righteous wrath. There is no need to live a single moment longer in captivity to the fear of death, since one reason Jesus came and lived among us was to destroy the one who holds the power of death, that is, the devil, the archenemy of our souls (Hebrews 2:14-15). In His own death and resurrection, Jesus has in fact defeated the devil and has rendered death powerless to separate us from His undying love.

If your hope is in Christ and His saving work for you, you don’t ever need to be frightened or terrified of God. But there is still a kind of fear of God that the Bible commends to us. In fact, if you fear God in the way everyone should fear God, you don’t need to fear anyone or anything else.

The Book of Proverbs has much to say about the “fear of the LORD.” It says “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7) and “the beginning of wisdom” (9:10). In other words, true wisdom, understanding, and insight into life begin with reverence and humility

before God. That is what the “fear of the LORD” is: It is a heart-attitude of holy reverence and humble obedience to God. It is not the kind of obedience born out of the fear of punishment. It is a spirit of willing submission to God that comes from the recognition of God’s overwhelming worthiness or worth-ship.

The Bible declares that blessings flow to those who fear the Lord in this way. Proverbs 28:14 says:

Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD.

Likewise, it says in Proverbs 31:30:

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

To fear the LORD, it says in Proverbs 8:13, is to hate evil. Therefore, as Proverbs 14:16 states, a wise man fears the LORD and shuns evil. You can’t entertain or engage in sin or evil of any kind and treat God with the reverence and awe He deserves at the same time. They are mutually exclusive of each other.

Like the Book of Proverbs, the Psalms speak of the blessedness of fearing God. Psalm 96 declares:

Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
He is to be feared above all gods.
(96:4)

Psalm 111:10 echoes Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow His precepts have good understanding.
To Him belongs eternal praise.

Indeed. Again, echoing the Book of Proverbs, Psalm 112:1 says:

Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
who finds great delight in His commands.

This refrain is repeated in Psalm 128:1, which says:

Blessed are all who fear the LORD,
who walk in His ways.

Note that there is an inseparable connection between *fearing the Lord* and *walking in His ways*. The person whose heart is filled with reverence toward God will seek to do God’s will

moment by moment. That goes for you and me. If we fear God in the way that is blessed by God, it will show in the way we live. Not just on Sunday but 24/7.

This connection between *fearing the LORD* and *walking in His ways* comes into sharp focus in the verses we read from Deuteronomy 10. In verse 12, Moses begins by asking essentially the same question the prophet Micah would echo hundreds of years later: “What does the LORD require of you?” The answer given in Micah 6:8 is: “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

What Moses says here is different, but it is also very much the same. What the Lord asks of His people, Moses says, is “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 soul, and to observe (that is, to obey) the LORD’s commands and decrees” Moses was giving them, which were for their own good (10:12-13). It is framed in such a way that the imperative to fear God with a holy and humble reverence is presented as Moses’ primary concern, and all the other things he mentions are characteristics of what it means to fear God. To fear God in this way is to follow Him wherever He leads. To fear God in this way is to love Him with everything you are and everything you have. To fear God in this way is to fully devote yourself to serving God and His purposes. To fear God in this way is to seek to obey God’s Word and to do His will at every moment. To fear God in this way is to make it our aim to please Him in all things at all times in all ways.

This is what it means for a follower of Christ to fear God. Today. In 2015. The revolutionary thing about the fear of God is that, if you fear God with a heart of reverence and humility, you do not need to be afraid of anyone or anything else. Period. For nothing and nobody – not even the worst thing your mind can imagine – can ever separate you from God and His love. No matter what. For example, all that Louis Zamperini went through as told in the book and now the movie *Unbroken*, even when Louis’ heart was far from God, could not separate him from God’s love.

I must leave you with this caution, though – a caution that comes from Jesus Himself. Listen to His words: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But I will show you whom you should fear. Fear Him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him” (Luke 12:4-5).

These are sobering words, aren’t they? If you have experienced God’s saving grace through faith in Christ, if the Lord Jesus has made your heart His home, and you seek to honor Him in the way you live, you need have no fear of being cast into hell. Jesus has delivered you – *us* – from the hell we deserve once and for all.

But suppose your heart is far from God today. Suppose you are living in rebellion against God. Suppose you have determined to live for yourself and to do what you want to do, regardless of what God wants or what anybody else says. Suppose you are just going through the motions so other people will think you’re a Christian when you’re really not. Unfortunately, that describes a lot of people today. If any of this is true of you, then the words of Jesus ought to send a chill down your spine, because you are in grave danger. It is a

dreadful thing, a fearsome, frightening thing, the Scripture says (Hebrews 10:31), to fall into the hands of the living God, having spurned His mercy and taken His love for granted.

If what I am saying describes any of you, I urge you, in the name of Jesus, to stop right where you are, to repent of the folly of your hard-heartedness with all sincerity and humility, and to give your heart, your *life*, to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith. Right now. Do not trifle with God's grace. Do not think that you can gamble with your life and outwit God. You never know how much or how little time you have to get right with God. Your life (or mine) could be over in an instant. So do not let this opportunity slip through your hands.

Begin this new year by putting your life in God's hands. Let Him have all of you. With reverence and humility, and trusting faith, fear the Lord your God and walk in His ways always. Beginning right now. Then you will have nothing to fear.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.