

Knowing the Fear of God (Discussion Guide on pg. 12)

2 Corinthians 5:11-15

What is the opposite of the fear of the Lord? It's not uncommon to hear Christians express the idea that the fear of the Lord is contrary to loving the Lord. To put it another way, many believe that fearing God and loving God are incompatible. Some would say that when a sinner comes to saving faith, love for God should replace the fear of God as their motivating factor for living the Christian life.

But as we will see from our text, a proper understanding of the fear of the Lord does not pit it against love for the Lord. When writing about the driving motivation of his life and ministry, Paul refers to both the fear of God and the love of God in the same context. He did not pit them against each other.

How many of you know, you can't have love without respect. "Where there is no respect, there is no love."

To have a love for God that shapes your life and destiny you must fear the Lord. To fear means that you have an awakened knowledge of God that gives you a profound sense of reverence and accountability toward God.

I appreciate John Stott's definition of the fear of the Lord: "The fear of God is a profound respect for His holiness, which includes a fear of the consequences of disobeying Him."

The text that is often used to pit the fear of God against love for God is 1 John 4:18, which states that *perfect love casts out fear*. But in context, the fear that John speaks of is fear of eternal condemnation which Christ absorbed on the cross for all who believe.

But although a true believer should no longer fear eternal condemnation, a saving and growing knowledge of God gives us both a love for God and a fear of the Lord. And having both the fear and the

love of the Lord gives us a profound sense of reverence and accountability to God.

When you love and fear God, what He thinks matters to you more than what anyone else thinks. When you love and fear God your aim and motivation in life will be to please Him, even if that means displeasing everybody else.

Main idea: Knowing the fear of God, faithful disciples are driven to lead others to Christ, live with integrity of heart, and serve others with radical love.

This morning we are going to see how knowing the fear of the Lord impacted Paul's life and although he appeared crazy to the world, he was commendably faithful in God's sight, and abundantly fruitful in service.

1. Persuasive in witness

To start with, knowing the fear of the Lord compelled Paul to be persuasive in witness. Having explained that because every believer will appear before the judgement seat of Christ in resurrected bodies, he made it his aim to please the Lord, Paul continues: *"Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others"* (2 Corinthians 5:11a).

What is Paul seeking to persuade others of? In verses 19, Paul explained that he was entrusted by God with the message of reconciliation. And having been entrusted, he writes in verse 20: *"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God"* (2 Corinthians 5:20).

So, with a great sense of accountability to God, Paul sought to persuade and implore others through the gospel to be reconciled to

God. Let me ask you, are the eternal realities of the gospel alive in your spirit and driving you to persuade others about Jesus?

One key way to know that you are maturing in faith is that you have a great sense of accountability to God and a great sense of responsibility to share the good news of Jesus with others. Pastors are not the hired guns for evangelism. As Spurgeon puts it, “It is the whole job of the whole church to preach the whole gospel to the whole world.”

Paul was driven to persuade others about Christ. And he was driven because he was awakened by the Spirit to the already and not yet glorious realities of the living Christ.

Additionally, the glories of God not only determined Paul’s passions, but drove him to implore others to come to Jesus for salvation. More specifically, he explains in verse 11 that what compelled him to persuade others about Jesus was *knowing the fear of the Lord*.

It’s important to note here that verse 11 begins with the word *therefore* which connects *knowing the fear of the Lord* with his previous reference to the *judgement seat of Christ*.

In the previous verse, Paul writes: “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.*” 2 Corinthians 5:10

Now, this connection begs the question, how did knowing the fear of the Lord, which Paul connects to the judgement seat of Christ, compel Paul to persuade others about Jesus?

According to 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, the judgement seat of Christ is not about determining who is saved and who is not. The scripture speaks of two future Judgements to come, the Great White Throne judgment in Revelation 20:11-15, and the judgement seat of Christ.

At the Great White Throne judgment unbelievers will be judged and cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death. The judgement seat of Christ is where the works of believers will be examined to determine their rewards in the new heavens and the new earth.

In light of this, knowing the fear of the Lord didn't compel Paul to persuade others of Christ because he was afraid of being condemned. As Paul explained in Romans 8:1, *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."*

But although a believer in Christ no longer has to fear eternal condemnation, Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 3:15 that at the judgement seat of Christ some believers will receive rewards while others will suffer loss.

Concerning the believers' gain and loss of rewards, Erwin Lutzer explained: "Yes, those who trust Christ alone for their salvation are redeemed, eternally forgiven, and legally perfect before God. But—and this is important—we should not conclude that every Christian will do well at the judgment seat of Christ. We can suffer serious loss; many of us might stand in shame before Christ as we see our lives pass before us. It is not true, as some teach, that ten minutes after our personal confrontation with Christ our meeting will have little significance because all of us will essentially receive the same reward. What happens at the judgment seat can have permanent consequences.

There are degrees of punishment in hell and degrees of reward in heaven. This does not mean that heaven will be divided into the haves and the have-nots. Eventually, everyone will be happy in heaven because God will comfort us by wiping the tears from our eyes. Everyone will be a servant and enjoy the fellowship afforded to all who enter the presence of God through Christ. But we shall not all have the same privileges, for the way we live will have a ripple effect that will go on for an eternity."

Let me add also that although Paul did not fear the Lord's condemnation, he did fear the loss of the Lord's commendation. Paul didn't have the attitude of those who say they would be content just to make it into heaven. Paul wanted to be found faithful at the judgment seat of Christ. He wanted to hear the words of commendation that Jesus expressed in the parable of the Talents, "*Well done, good and faithful servant*" (Matthew 25:21a).

Paul did not want to meet Jesus empty handed. Rather, he wanted to stand before Jesus having given his all to the one who gave His all to him on the cross. He wanted to honor Jesus at the judgement seat with a life spent advancing His kingdom. He wanted to be able say thank you Jesus not just with words but with a life well lived to the glory of His name.

How many of you are thankful for the saving grace of Jesus? To Paul, the saving grace of Jesus did not mean that now he could just coast his way through life. Paul wasn't like entitled children whose parents sacrificed much to pay for their college tuition, and they just do enough to graduate or drop out because they knew mom and dad will take care of them.

To Paul the attitude that "I'm going to coast my way into heaven because I'm saved by grace" would be a disgrace to grace. The greatest loss you could suffer at the judgement seat of Christ would be to miss the greatest opportunity to show by the life you lived that Jesus meant everything to you.

The best way Paul knew to honor the saving grace of Jesus was by having lived his life persuading and imploring others to receive His grace and be reconciled to God.

Like Paul, do you know the fear of the Lord? Do you have a profound respect for God that makes you tremble at the thought of knowingly disobeying Him? Do you have a profound sense of accountability to

God that among other things compels you with great urgency to reach others for Christ?

I'm afraid that some of us may have a distorted view of God—a view that believes that because I'm saved by grace through faith I can't do anything to displease the Lord.

As Ray Pritchard explained, “God judges us according to our works. That concept troubles some people. “Aren't we saved by faith?” Yes, we are. We are saved by faith, but we are judged by our works. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that since you are saved by faith, your life doesn't matter.”

How we live matters in this life and for all eternity. But sadly it appears that because of this low view of God—because many professing Christians do not live with a profound respect for the holiness of God, their lives are more conformed by the world than by Christ. They fear man more than God. They're seeking blessings from God in spite of their sin when they should be broken over their sin and humbly seeking His strength to overcome it. They pray with a greater concern for their comfort, when God's greater concern is for our character. They forget that Jesus taught us to pray to the Father *hallowed be your name*, and instead they pray more about what will make them happy than about what will make them holy. They pray without a profound sense of the holiness and transcendence of God— without an understanding that happiness is a byproduct of holiness, of living a life set apart for God.

This brings us to a second way that knowing the fear of the Lord impacted Paul's life and ministry.

2. Pure in heart

In addition to being *persuasive in witness*, his fear of the Lord—his profound reverence and respect for God made Paul *pure in heart*. Having explained that by knowing the fear of the Lord he would

persuade others, Paul continues in verse 11, *“But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.”* 2 Corinthians 5:11b

Notice that Paul not only lived the way he did because he knew he would have to give an account at the judgement seat of Christ, he always lived his life with a sense of accountability to God. He explains, *“But what we are is known to God”* (v.11b) Paul wanted the Corinthians to be persuaded that “he lived knowing that ‘all he is’ and ‘all that he does’ was open to God” (Paul Barnett).

It’s been said that your true character is who you are when no one else is watching. To fear God means that what He knows, sees and thinks is what matters to you more than anyone or anything else.

Notice also that according to verse 11, Paul hoped that the God-fearing man that he is, was known in the *conscience* of the Corinthians. Although the fear of man did not dictate how Paul lived his life, he did want men to know that he lived a life of integrity for the sake of his gospel ministry.

Remember, because of selfish ambition there were leaders in the church who maligned Paul’s character to gain power and influence. But although Paul defended the integrity of his ministry in this letter, he didn’t do so for selfish-gain.

Rather, he sought to gain their trust so that he could continue to influence them for Christ. Paul did not try to impress the Corinthians by his outward appearance or eloquent speech as others did.

Instead, he hoped that because his life was an open book before God with nothing to hide, God would bear witness to the integrity of his ministry in the consciences of the Corinthians. As one commentator put it: “As a man is in his conscience, so is he before God. Every day in the life of the apostolic ministry [of Paul] is judgement day.” Paul Barnett

Can the same be said of our lives? Whether in public or private do we live our lives with a profound sense of accountability towards God? Do we do what we do ultimately for God's eyes only?

God rewards and blesses the life that is lived in the fear of God and for the praise and honor of His name. Remember that in Matthew 6, when teaching about not doing public acts of righteousness for the praise of man, Jesus said three times, "*And your Father who sees in secret will reward you*" (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18).

The principle that Jesus is teaching here is not that it's wrong to do acts of righteousness in public, like praying. He's teaching that whatever acts of righteousness we do, should be done for God's eyes only, for an audience of one, for the praise and honor of His name.

Notice also that Paul explains that the reason he is telling the Corinthians about how he lived his life in the fear of God, was not to lift himself up. He writes: "*We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.*" 2 Corinthians 5:12

What Paul is saying is that he's not defending the integrity of his ministry for bragging rights. Rather, he wants them to be able to properly boast about his ministry in his defense to those who opposed him.

Those who opposed him cared more about outward appearance—what man could see. So Paul equipped them to answer his detractors in a way that communicated that what matters most to him and what should matter most to all is what God sees.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to care more about what's in the heart. Who sees what's in the heart? As the Lord said to the prophet

Samuel, *“For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”* 1 Samuel 16:7

How many of you know that when in this world you live a God-fearing life—a life that cares more about what God sees, people are going to think you’re strange or crazy?

Notice that after explaining ‘the fear of God principle’ that what God sees and knows is what matters most, Paul continues: *“For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you”* (2 Corinthians 5:13).

Interestingly, the word translated *“beside ourselves”* is the same word used in Mark 3:21 when Jesus’ own family accused Him of being out of His mind. Remember also that when Paul was witnessing to the Roman officials, toward the end of his discourse, Festus said to Paul with a loud voice, *“Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.”* Acts 26:24

Now whether they viewed Paul’s passion for the gospel as being overzealous or his sacrifices in ministry as foolish or reckless, Paul says, *it is for God*. That is to say that although others viewed what Paul was doing as crazy, Paul wasn’t doing it to impress people. Everything he did was for God.

Moreover, he explains, *if we are in our right mind, it is for you”* (v.13b). When Paul ministered to others—when he sought to persuade others for Christ, he wasn’t trying to be flashy or impressive. His goal was to be clear, and to exercise self-control for the honor of God and for the good of others.

Yes, he took big risks to bring the gospel to others, but he didn’t do so for his own advantage or to look impressive but because he was compelled by the fear and love of God.

This brings us to a final way that knowing the fear of God impacted Paul's life and ministry.

3. Passionate in service

Knowing the fear of the Lord made Paul *persuasive in witness, pure in heart* and, *passionate in service*. Paul continues: *“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”* 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

Remember, we learned last week that what you long for and love most in life will shape who you are and what you live for. We were created to long and live for something greater than ourselves.

Many today do not know a love that gives them a driving passion in life or a transcendent purpose for the decisions they make and the priorities they set. They do whatever seems convenient, safe or comfortable. They live for worldly gain or self-serving interests.

But the more we know Christ's love—the more we are in awe at the thought that God hung on the cross to save me, the more our love for Him will define our lives. And when His love is manifested in our hearts, our perspective on life and the way we view people is transformed.

When like Paul our lives are in the grip of the love of Jesus, His love will determine our choices and our paths.

Notice that according to Paul there are three themes related to love in verses 14-15 that determined his choices and paths and should also determine ours.

The first theme, as one commentator observed, is that “Christ died for all (5:14). Second, that since all people are dead spiritually, they all

need someone —Jesus —to give them new life. Third, that once we have given Him our lives, we no longer desire to live for ourselves but for Him (5:15).

When we align our trajectory with these three markers, our approach to life will differ completely from the world. Unlike the world's positive "we're all good people" approach, we view all people —including ourselves —as essentially bad apart from divine grace. At the same time, we view all people as potentially "savable" because of divine grace. This radically alters our perspective: we now view our own purpose in life as Christ-centered in response to divine grace."
Charles R. Swindoll

Brothers and sisters, do you know the fear and love of the Lord? The fear and love of the Lord are not incompatible.

When you care more about what God thinks than what anyone else thinks, and you are secure in the love of Christ, your life will no longer be controlled by the passions of your selfish desires.

Instead, your life will be driven by a burning passion to spread the supremacy of Jesus for the joy of all people and to the satisfaction of your soul.

People will think you're a little or a lot crazy. But how many of you know, if you don't look a little strange to this world, you will make little difference in the world for Christ.

By strange I don't mean obnoxious. I mean our love for God and people will be viewed as crazy love.

In his book, *Fan the Flame*, Jim Cymbala writes, "Paul was "driven" to make converts. But it was the heart of Christ that drove him. I've studied church history enough to know that all the great soul-winners were the same way. My late friend Dave Wilkerson, who founded Teen Challenge, once observed that God never seemed to work through a

man or woman until they got “a little bit crazy”—in other words, radical—about leading others to Jesus. No one can inject that kind of passion into us. Only God can. Something divine needs to happen inside us, making us discontent unless we see people coming to Christ. Otherwise we can grow complacent and accept ‘what is,’ rather than seeing ‘what could be’ through God.” Jim Cymbala

Conclusion

Do you know the fear and love of the Lord that delivers you from both the fear of man and bondage to selfish desires? The word of God teaches us that fear is something we can and must learn. The Psalmist exhorts His people, “Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD” (Psalm 34:11).

When we come into a saving knowledge of Jesus, His Spirit comes to reside in us so that we can grow in the fear and love of God through prayer, through the word and in community with other God fearing and Christ loving people.

May we labor through the grace of God at work in us to grow in the knowledge of God and seek Him to teach us the fear and love of the Lord.

Discussion

Knowing the Fear of God
2 Corinthians 5:11-15

Main idea: Knowing the fear of God, faithful disciples are driven to lead others to Christ, live with integrity of heart, and serve others with radical love.

Review

Some would say that when a sinner comes to saving faith, love for God should replace the fear of God as their motivating factor for living the Christian life. The text that is often used to pit the fear of

God against love for God is 1 John 4:18, which states that perfect love casts out fear. Is loving God and fearing God incompatible? Should loving God replace the fear of God as your motivation for living for God? Why or why not?

What does it mean to fear the Lord?

Assess

How did knowing the fear of the Lord, which Paul connects to the judgement seat of Christ, compel Paul to persuade others about Jesus? 2 Corinthians 5:10-11; 20

What kind of loss should a believer fear at the judgement seat of Christ and why? 1 Corinthians 3:15

What would you say is the greatest loss you could suffer at the judgement seat of Christ?

How can we honor the Lord at the Judgement seat of Christ?

Because we are saved by grace through faith, does this mean that we can never bring displeasure to the heart of God by the way we live our lives? Can a child of God make God angry?

Paul, who received great opposition and criticism, wrote, "But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience" (2 Corinthians 5:11b). How did knowing that everything he is and does is known of God, motivate Paul to fulfill his ministry?

Why did Paul hope that his true character and motivations in ministry was known in the consciences of the Corinthians?

Remember that in Matthew 6, when teaching about not doing public acts of righteousness for the praise of man, Jesus said three times, "And your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:4,

6, 18). What did Jesus mean by these words? Why does He reward what He sees us doing in secret?

If Paul feared God more than man, why did he defend the integrity of his life and ministry in his letters to the Corinthians? 2 Corinthians 5:12

What led others to think that Paul was out of his mind in the way that he lived his life and served the cause of Christ? 2 Corinthians 5:13; Acts 26:24

To be effective witnesses for Christ, should believers look strange or crazy to the world? If so, in what way?

How should the love of Christ define our lives and shape the trajectory of our lives? 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

Apply

Are the eternal realities of the gospel alive in your spirit and driving you to persuade others about Jesus?

If fear is paralyzing you from sharing Jesus with others, how can you overcome that fear?

Do you know the fear of the Lord? Do you have a profound respect for God that makes you tremble at the thought of knowingly disobeying Him? Do you have a profound sense of accountability to God that among other things compels you with great urgency to reach others for Christ?

Whether in public or private do you live your life with a profound sense of accountability towards God?

Does your private life match your public life? If not, what has to change and why?

How do we learn the fear of the Lord and grow in the love of Christ?
(Psalm 34:11; Ephesians 3:14; Acts 2:42-44)