

# The Anti-Virtue of Cowardice

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Sermon Series #2 | Sept 17, 2023 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Preached by Steve H



## Opening



“BeanBoozled.” Yes, you heard me right, I said the word “BeanBoozled.” It’s the name of a simple game produced by Jelly Belly, the company that has been creating a wide assortment of “gourmet” jellybean flavors for six generations. Here’s the product description for their game:

*BeanBoozled pairs two jellybeans that look exactly alike but could not taste more different. You could get one of our most popular flavors or one of our wildest. Here's the catch - you won't know which ones are which until you try them! Are you brave enough?*

Basically, you spin a wheel and choose a jellybean that matches the look...except you won’t know if the bean is flavored like:

- Tutti Frutti or Stinky Socks
- Pomegranate or Old Bandage
- Cappuccino or Liver & Onions
- Buttered Popcorn or Rotten Egg

Anyone want to play? LOL

The entire game is basically a chance to laugh at your friends or family as they struggle to take a bite...or as they choose the wrong bean and suffer the disgusting consequences! It hinges on humorizing fear. And the last line of marketing puts that fear in moral terms: “Are you *brave* enough?”

Wow. Bravery and beans. It’s not a classic setting for checking courage, but it raises some questions, nonetheless.

Is it actually *brave* to bite a bean and gag? And what of the people who choose NOT to eat? If they aren’t brave, then what are they?

BeanBoozled may have just opened a can of worms for us as we continue to explore the concept of fear (and, by the way, “Can of Worms” looks an awful like “Strawberry Jam,” so be careful!).



Last week we began our four-week series on fear entitled, “Fear Not!” We want to help you **recognize** fear, **face** fear, and **fight** fear. So, in the first sermon we explored and defined fear. While fear is a natural human emotion, you and I have an obligation to *master* that fear by CHOOSING to trust God in the face of it.



*"For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who help you. Fear not, I am the one who helps you." (Isaiah 41:13, ESV)*

His presence (being nearby), his promises, and His presents (gifts that supersede fear) are what you need to face something scary and "Fear not."

But what if we fail? What if we cave in to the fear we face? What if we look fear in the eye...and blink? How bad is that?

Today, I think it's time for us to honestly look at the WRONG REACTION to fear. Today, we want to help you walk out of fear without succumbing to the "anti-virtuous" sin of cowardice.



## ***The Sin of Cowardice***

### ***A Modern Example of Cowardice***

A game with candy is fun. But let's raise the stakes a little bit...beyond beans.

**[What we're about to talk about is upsetting, but it is real]**



On May 24 of last year, the Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX, came under attack from a lone, eighteen-year-old gunman. He entered the school, and over the course of the next hour plus, he killed 19 children and 2 adults, injuring 17 others.

The shooting was an act of undeniable evil. There will never be an excuse for such actions! We all recognize that taking the lives of others is wrong, and that the shooter (regardless of any depression or bullying or antisocial behavior he displayed) made a horrible decision when he picked up that AR-15 rifle and began his shooting spree.

*[Side note: There is always a better choice, even if you are struggling with others or struggling with yourself! Don't take others out in the process. If you need help, or you're contemplating suicide or worse, reach out and talk to someone and we can help you find a better solution and a better future!]*

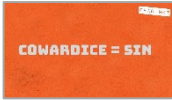
Killing is an obvious sin. But the other part of the Uvalde shooting that bothered so many people was the *lack of decisive action* on the part of law enforcement as they responded. According to an official report on the incident,

*"At Robb Elementary, law enforcement responders failed to adhere to their active shooter training, and they failed to prioritize saving the lives of innocent victims over their own safety... there was an unacceptably long period of time before officers breached the classroom, neutralized the attacker, and began rescue efforts."*

Officers waited more than 1 hour and 14 minutes on-site before taking decisive action. Yes, they arrived there after only a few short minutes...and eventually numbered as many as 376 on site...yet none acted while kids were being shot. They were waiting for...something? And in the meantime, they sat back and did nothing while shots rang out, screams echoed, and innocent

kids and teachers bled out. Later on, they pointed to procedures and miscommunications as reasons they didn't act. But the biggest thing that stopped everyone was clearly COWARDICE.

Cowardice was a *sin* on full display in Uvalde.



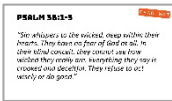
## About the Sin

"Whoa, buddy!" you might say. "Hold on!" Sin?!?"

Yes. The *sin* of cowardice.

We don't always get specific when we talk about sin. We talk about it in more general terms. We quote from April's kid ministry teachings that our kids learn, that sin is "anything we think, say, or do, that breaks God's law" and breaks His heart.

Sin is a twisting of God's good intentions. Sin is a rebellion against God's good commands. Sin is a failure to meet the standards God has set for us.

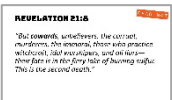


*"Sin whispers to the wicked, deep within their hearts. They have no fear of God at all. In their blind conceit, they cannot see how wicked they really are. Everything they say is crooked and deceitful. They refuse to act wisely or do good." (Psalm 36:1–3, NLT)*

In general, sin is a big problem! But, if sin is such a problem, we need to move our understanding of it from a general category of "bad behavior" to specific actions that we must avoid. We need to call out sin and get uncomfortable. We need to recognize when our behaviors or our heart have crossed the line. We need to pinpoint actions that are not permissible.

Cowardice is one of those specific sins!

Look at it in a list from Revelation and see how the Bible groups it:



*"But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." (Revelation 21:8, NLT)*

That's heavy stuff! Cowardice keeps company in that list with some big bad behaviors.

You might be tempted to downplay cowardice or dismiss it. But don't! We can't mess around with sin, including cowardice. We need to have a better understanding of what it is so we can make sure it is not an option we exercise when we are afraid.

## Why It's a Sin

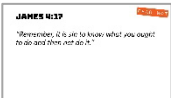
Sin is often divided into two categories: sins of COMMISSION and sins of OMISSION.



- **Sins of Commission** are sins you actively commit. In other words, you must exercise your will to do something that would otherwise not happen.

- Robbing a bank is a sin of commission. You don't just stumble into robbery and accidentally pull a gun on the bank teller and demand all the money. It requires you to do something – to commit the sin.
- **Sins of Omission** are sins you passively commit. In other words, you do nothing...but you do *nothing* at time when you are supposed to do *something*.
  - Neglecting a child is a sin of omission. You are supposed to care for and nurture a child. But if you decide not to provide food or protection, you are omitting something you ought to give – and therefore you are sinning.

Sins of omission are described this way in the book of James:



*“Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.”*  
(James 4:17, NLT)

God calls us to live in a certain way. There are behaviors he expects of us – things we “ought” to do. The positive embodiment of God’s standards in our lives can be called “virtues” (ex: humility, charity, chastity, gratitude, patience, etc). But their counterparts can be called “vices” or “sins.” They are “Anti-Virtues” that we must denounce.

Cowardice is an anti-virtue! It is the opposite of bravery, or courage. It is an omission of the right action we should take. And it is a sin!



## ***A Biblical Example: Saul (1 Samuel 9-10)***

While we can find cowardice throughout the Bible, one egregious example is Saul in the book of 1 Samuel. In chapter 8, the nation of Israel had expressed a desire to be like the nations around them and have a king to rule over them (this is bad on so many levels, but it’s a discussion for another day!). The main thing you need to know is that the prophet Samuel is guided by God to anoint and appoint a man to take this role. This isn’t Samuel’s choosing – it is God’s!

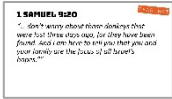


*“Now the LORD had told Samuel the previous day, “About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him to be the leader of my people, Israel. He will rescue them from the Philistines, for I have looked down on my people in mercy and have heard their cry.” When Samuel saw Saul, the LORD said, “That’s the man I told you about! He will rule my people.””* (1 Samuel 9:15–17, NLT)

Saul is a tall, handsome man. He shows up in the story because his father had lost some donkeys, and dad wanted Saul to find them. These donkeys were elusive, though, because after days of searching throughout the land, Saul and his servant fail to find the donkeys.

**Note:** His search area would be the equivalent of going from the Land of Tongie to the Land of Basehor and the Land of Bonner. The search went the equivalent about from McLouth to the Legends in length, Piper to Bonner in width. It’s a significant area to search!

As a last-ditch effort, they decide to track down the prophet Samuel to see if he can provide any divine guidance. Well, when they meet up, Samuel surprises Saul with some exciting information:



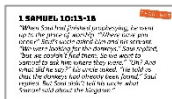
*"... don't worry about those donkeys that were lost three days ago, for they have been found. And I am here to tell you that you and your family are the focus of all Israel's hopes."*

(1 Samuel 9:20, NLT)

What?!? He hoped for donkeys, and he got a crown instead! Crazy! Saul is identified as God's choice, he is anointed as the new king, and the Spirit of God comes upon him so powerfully that he himself begins prophesying!

It's hard to come up with a bigger "ought" for Saul to obey. This is a command. This is what God wants Saul to do!

And this is where cowardice creeps in.



*"When Saul had finished prophesying, he went up to the place of worship. "Where have you been?" Saul's uncle asked him and his servant. "We were looking for the donkeys," Saul replied, "but we couldn't find them. So we went to Samuel to ask him where they were." "Oh? And what did he say?" his uncle asked. "He told us that the donkeys had already been found," Saul replied. But Saul didn't tell his uncle what Samuel said about the kingdom."* (1 Samuel 10:13–16, NLT)

This biggest news isn't even shared! It is hidden. Saul doesn't really want his family to know. How do we know his reticence was out of fear? Because the next passage magnifies it.

Samuel calls the nation together to introduce this new king, and God has a dramatic presentation to help build the excitement. God narrows down the people by tribe, by clan, by family and finally by individual. God reveals the identity of this new king, but there's a problem.



*"Then he brought each family of the tribe of Benjamin before the LORD, and the family of the Matrites was chosen. And finally Saul son of Kish was chosen from among them. But when they looked for him, he had disappeared! So they asked the LORD, "Where is he?" And the LORD replied, "He is hiding among the baggage." So they found him and brought him out, and he stood head and shoulders above anyone else."* (1 Samuel 10:21–23, NLT)

"He is hiding among the baggage." Can you picture it? On the surface, we might laugh because it seems ridiculous – this tall, handsome man trying to blend in with the luggage. But think about it more and the humor dies down. Take the clear, overwhelming direction God provided Saul– the gifts he gave, along with His own presence – and contrast that with Saul's reaction...cowering in the bags so he can avoid doing what God clearly directed.

It doesn't seem so funny now, does it? It is shameful! It is sinful!



## Recognizing Cowardice

We can see cowards clearly in stories like this one. We see them in other places in Scripture. We discover that Adam and Eve, Gideon, Jonah, Ananias & Sapphira -- and more! -- are cowards who cave to their fears rather than doing what God wanted or commanded.

But cowardice is sometimes sneaky. You and I don't always recognize it or identify it quickly. There's no label, or else it's like a jellybean from "BeanBoozled:" it comes packaged to look like something else.

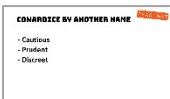
## *Cowardice by Another Name*

Why repackage it? Shame!

C.S. Lewis writes that Satan has "made men proud of most vices, but not of cowardice."<sup>1</sup>

Most people don't brag about turning tail and running! It might get played off for laughs, but we all recognize that bravery beats cowardice in the polls anyday!

Being a chicken is not applauded, and so we find other ways to describe and justify it. We repackage it as something more virtuous.



Being a coward is just being:

- **Cautious.** We emphasize that we're "only being safe."
- **Prudent.** We point out that we're being practical.
- **Discreet.** We don't want to make a ruckus.

Because we don't want to face our fears, people from Uvalde to Tonganoxie rationalize our reluctance instead of admitting that we are cowards.



*Ex: Last week, in a couple services, I talked a little about my fear of heights. I'm mostly fine with enclosed heights where I won't fall over the edge (ex: an airplane, an observation deck). But when there's a chance I might go plummeting through the air, I get nervous (ex: Grand Canyon).*

*Well, a few years back our house really needed a fresh coat of paint. And painting my house put me in the "nervous/scared" territory! I have a split level, and to get up to the peak means I have to go up really high! In fact, my ladder didn't even reach it – I had to borrow one. And it was terrifying! I would go up, clutching the ladder so hard as I tried to extend ever-so-carefully to reach where I needed to reach.*

*Because it was so stressful, I took a long time! I mean, I started in the fall...took a break for winter...and finished in the spring. In the meantime, a neighbor got his done in about 2 days!*

*I humble bragged about my facing my fears, but the fear was dragging this project out. I didn't tell anyone I was a coward...but I repackaged it and told them I was trying to be*

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<sup>1</sup> Screwtape Letters – Letter 29

*careful. That I was trying to wait on the days when conditions were most favorable for my success. That I was waiting until I could get a ladder that could reach.*

Now, please don't misunderstand me. Caution, Prudence, and Discretion are all wonderful things! Scripture admonishes us to be wise instead of foolish, prudent instead of careless, discreet instead of reckless. Such behaviors are virtues!

But cowardice is an anti-virtue. It hides behind these values and uses them as an excuse to avoid something that ought to be done.

## *Avoiding an "Ought"*

If we want to conquer the sin of cowardice, we've got to recognize when our fear is leading us to disobey God.

We aren't sinful cowards for feeling fear and wanting to avoid something scary. If we are afraid of tigers, is it SINFUL to avoid that part of the zoo or the jungle? No. If we are afraid of getting robbed, is it SINFUL to lock your doors at night? No.

If we are scared to get on the ladder, is it SINFUL to take our time? No.

Why? Because there is no "ought to" from God. God doesn't have a general command to approach tigers or to leave your doors unlocked. God did not command me to paint my house, God did not tell me to climb a ladder. And while God certainly heard a lot from me while I was ON the ladder, He was not specifically telling me to engage in this home repair project!

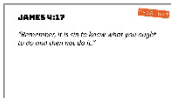
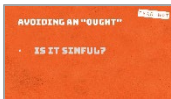
But we can't stop there and give ourselves an easy out. We must be more discerning and make sure we aren't ignoring His directions.

*"Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it."*  
(James 4:17, NLT)

God didn't tell me to paint, so I'm not a coward for taking my time. But in my fears, I did miss an "ought." In between clutching rungs and holding my breath, I was afraid to ask for much help! I *ought* to have fought the sin of pride – the fear of looking stupid or weak – but my fear stopped me from asking. I was fearful of heights, but I was a *coward* for being afraid to confront my pride.

*(Side note: God sent me people anyway – people like Tim Smith, among others, who just showed up and used his firefighter superpowers to go up on the highest parts to help me out. I gave in, but it did hurt my ego a bit!)*

God doesn't say you have to confront every fear; He doesn't say we *all* must pick up a snake, use the porta potty, go skydiving, speak in public, or eat the jellybean. But He might call you to do something where you realize that your fear is an obstacle. To obey God will require you to face it. And in that case, cowardice is a sin you must reject!





Remember last week’s communion meditation? Reece Hollingsworth had us imagine a scenario in which Jesus walked away from the Garden of Gethsemane and avoided the cross...because it was too hard, too painful, too scary. In other words, he asked us to picture Jesus as a *coward*.

But that label just doesn’t stick with Jesus, because He ALWAYS did the will of the Father. As he agonized over the path to the cross, He still prayed:

*“Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”* (Luke 22:42, NLT)

Jesus knew the “ought.”

He refused to repackage it.

Instead, He was confident in the will of God and He obeyed His Heavenly Father.



## ***Cowards No More***

Let’s be like Jesus – cowards no more!

*“The wicked run away when no one is chasing them, but the godly are as bold as lions.”* (Proverbs 28:1, NLT)

I want you to walk out of fear without succumbing to the “anti-virtue” of cowardice.

The best way to conquer cowardice is to consider God’s commands. Know the “ought” in your situation. Know what God is asking you to do, as a general virtue to implement or a specific call to action.

Before you cower and hide in the luggage, ask yourself these five questions:

1. Is my fear stopping me from **obeying a clear command** of Scripture?
2. Is my fear causing me to **believe any lies** about God or myself?
3. Is my fear clouding my **ability to see God’s plan**?
4. Is my fear drowning out the **voice of God**?
5. Is my fear **rooted in something** that Jesus has **overcome**?

If the answer to any of those questions is “yes,” then you are no longer free to fear. There is an “ought” to be followed. So, work to understand the “ought” in your situation, and then recognize that God provides everything you need to turn your back on cowardice. His Spirit equips you with the moral qualities you’ll need to obey Him, even while you are afraid!

Don’t let your fear tempt you into a sin of omission. Don’t allow yourself to be a coward.

Instead, let’s bravely act on God’s commands with no hesitation, and be cowards no more!



<< PRAYER >>



# Invitation

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Do you trust that Jesus has equipped you with everything you need to fight against cowardice and fear? If not, where do you struggle?

Let us pray for you this morning if you need it, or help you grow closer to Jesus if you need Him!

We invite you to come up and share things we can pray for as we stand and sing our hymn of invitation.

***PRAYER REQUESTS:***

# Notes

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## ***The Sin of Cowardice (Isaiah 41:13)***

*A Modern Example of Cowardice*

*About the Sin (Psalm 36:1-3; Revelation 21:8)*

*Why It's a Sin (James 4:17)*

## ***A Biblical Example: Saul (1 Samuel 9-10)***

### ***Recognizing Cowardice***

*Cowardice by Another Name*

*Avoiding an "Ought" (James 4:17; Luke 22:42)*

### ***Cowards No More (Proverbs 28:1)***

1. Is my fear stopping me from obeying a clear command of Scripture?
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# Sermon Discussion ?s

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*Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.*

## ***Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose***

- If someone called you a coward, how would you react? What associations do you have with the word that shape your reaction?

## ***Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters***

- What are some examples of cowardice that you can point to from recent news stories, books, or movies? What qualities tie them together?
- Is cowardice a sin? Read Revelation 21:8. Do you typically view cowardice as badly as you view the other items in that list? Why or why not?
- What is a sin of “commission?” What is a sin of “omission?” (Google the terms if you need help). Read James 4:17. Which does it describe? Which one is cowardice?
- If cowardice is an “anti-virtue,” which virtues counter it?
- Israel's first king, Saul, provides a picture of cowardice in 1 Samuel 9-10. Why do you think Saul hides from the responsibilities God commanded? Have you ever shied away from following God's commands? What is scary about following Him?
- What excuses do you make for cowardice? For instance, do you use “caution” as an excuse? Why are we ashamed to describe ourselves as cowards?
- How do you recognize what you “ought” to do? (James 4:17) Answer for the general virtues God expects of us, as well as for specific calls to action He provides.
- Do you trust that God has equipped you with everything you need to fight against cowardice and fear? If not, where do you struggle? Ask others to pray for you in this area.

## ***Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God***

- Ask God to help you recognize what you “ought” to do in every situation. Pray for the courage to act in accordance with His will, rather than hiding from your responsibility.