

## I. Introduction

Good morning! Good to see you! If we haven't met yet, I'm Ethan. I'm one of the pastors here. And whether you're new to Union or you're here every Sunday, welcome. I'm glad you're here.

### Reintroduction To The Series

When we gather as a church, we open up the Bible. And in the Bible, there are different kinds of books. There are narrative histories and there are letters. Books of the law and books that record prophecy. And in the middle of the Bible, sandwiched between history and prophecy sits a group of books known as the "wisdom literature:" Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. And all five show us in different ways that God cares for us so much that he not only gives us the right and wrong of His law, he not only gives us gigantic truths of theology, he not only gives us a grand metanarrative that makes sense of the big picture... he also cares about how we live in the day to day. He cares about the small decisions we make and the character with which we navigate the gray areas of life, when things don't seem black and white. God cares for us and so he gave us wise counsel.

I wonder: where do you go when you need wisdom? Where do you go when you can't see a clear path forward? When you don't just need to know what is right or wrong, but what is best? We have oceans of information in the palm of our hand and all the experts and guru's and guides at our fingertips. But most of the evidence seems to tell us that having all the information in the world isn't helping us. That we're actually more anxious, more lonely, more divided, more confused, more hopeless than those who have gone before us. We have all this knowledge, and education, and technique available; but do all those tools give us wisdom for how to be the kind of person who can cut through the noise of the world and live with resilience and confidence? Where do we go to be formed as people who are joyful and peaceful, even as the world around us is in chaos? This is why we're spending time considering the wisdom of scripture and how to be formed as wise people.

Last week Pastor Kyle began this series really helpfully in Proverbs 4:7, "The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom." He helped us to see that wisdom isn't a recipe of steps to take, it's a foundation to stand on. And to get wisdom, you have to want wisdom! We saw that wisdom is seeing the world rightly and acting in that world in a way that will lead to flourishing, as defined by God. Ultimately, wisdom is embodied in a person: Jesus Christ. So as we seek wisdom, we're not looking for facts and tips to fix us, we're seeking to know the person of Wisdom. We're seeking Jesus. And in our intimacy with him to be transformed into people who reflect his wisdom.

### Intro Today's Message

Last week our text said "The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom." This week our text gives us another facet of where wisdom begins. So if you have your Bible you can turn to the

book of Proverbs. I'm going to read Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.  
(Proverbs 1:7)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (Proverbs 9:10)

You can split the book of Proverbs into two main sections. Chapters 10-31 are where you find all the actual proverbs - the short, pithy sayings that get at the practicalities of life. But chapters 1-9 are actually an argument for why you should care about wisdom. And at the beginning of that argument, in chapter 1 and at the end of that argument in chapter 9 we have this bookend reminder: there is a way to *start* in wisdom and there is a way to *stay* in wisdom: fear the Lord.

Now, right away I want to recognize the tension we might feel. There is a word there that makes us uncomfortable. If the verses said, "The love of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" or "awe and wonder before God is the beginning of wisdom" that wouldn't make our ears perk up and our stomachs clench, would it? But the verses don't say that. They say "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Now, if you are uncomfortable with that idea it may be that you came by your discomfort honestly. The Bible says in 1 John that "God is love" and that "perfect love casts out fear." The most repeated command in scripture is "do not be afraid." So we feel awkward about this phrase, "the fear of the Lord." And yet, here it is in the text. And it's not just in these two verses. The phrase "the fear of the Lord" shows up fourteen times in the book of Proverbs. And it's not just in Proverbs. It's all over the Old Testament. Psalm 33 says, "Let all the earth fear the Lord" (v 8). And it's not just in the Old Testament. Mary (Jesus' mother) sings a song in Luke 1 that says God's mercy is for those who fear him (1:50). The book of Acts says that the church multiplied as it walked in the fear of the Lord. (9:31). In Romans 3, when Paul describes those who are far from God, says there is no fear of God in them (3:18).

So if the most repeated command in the Bible is "do not be afraid" and at the same time the scriptures repeatedly tell us to fear the Lord, then what must be true is that there are different kinds of fear. There is a kind of fear that leads to death and a kind of fear that leads to life. An ungodly fear and a godly fear. A fear that should be killed and a fear that should be cultivated. And today we need to talk about both kinds of fear so that we can be free from the kind of fear that gives birth to foolishness and grow in the kind of fear that leads to wisdom.

If we want to find God's way of flourishing in life, we need to understand what it means to fear the Lord. That's going to be the question that animates the rest of the message today:

### **What does it mean to fear the Lord?**

As we consider that question, I just want to commend to you a book that has been really helpful for me. In fact, it's been a major influence for this message. It's called, "What Does It Mean to Fear the Lord?" by Michael Reeves. It's excellent and it's short. You can read it in

about an hour and a half. This book is actually an abridged version of a slightly longer book he's written called "*Rejoice and Tremble*." Reeves is a really helpful writer and teacher and this is me citing my sources and recommending them to you. If you read one of these books, you will be really helped.

## II. Kinds of Fear

A few weeks ago we took our kids to a water park where, my older kids and I discovered "The Drop Slide." You climb up four stories and when you get to the top you watch as people in front of you climb into this clear, plexiglass, coffin-shaped tube. And you stand in the coffin and a voice counts down and all of a sudden the floor falls out from under you and you drop straight down. And then eventually the slide catches you and you rocket out the other end with the biggest wedgie you've ever had. It's awesome! Now, when I climbed into the coffin-tube and heard the countdown start my heart began to race, my breathing accelerated, my muscles tensed. When the floor dropped out I cried out in panic. Those are all feelings of fear that led to something happy. But we all know moments of panic when our muscles tense and our heart rate increases and they're connected to real danger or tragedy. Our experiences of fear share common traits, but there are *different kinds* of fear. It's important that we see that. And this is especially important when we think about what it means to fear the Lord.

In Exodus 20, when God's people are gathered at Mount Sinai it says,

<sup>18</sup> Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." <sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin."

Did you catch that? According to Moses, there is a wrong fear of God to be rejected and a right fear of God to be embraced. Those who have a wrong fear of God stand far off and try to hide themselves from God. But those who have the right fear of God won't be afraid to draw near to him.

### Sinful Fear

So let's think about the wrong kind of fear. Maybe a more accurate way to talk about this fear is to call it *sinful fear* because it's a fear that is rooted in our sin. All the way back in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve sinned against God for the very first time, it says,

...they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup> But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" <sup>10</sup> And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." (8-10)

There is a kind of fear that drives us away from God. It's a fear that isn't compatible with love for God. It fuels a dread of God and stokes our doubts and justifies our rebellion against him. This is the fear that drives the demons to shudder before God, and causes the atheist to be repulsed at the idea of God, and keeps us locked in idolatry. It's a fear that begins with a misunderstanding of God.

And then there is a sin-rooted fear of God that grows out of misunderstanding God and gives way to a sin-rooted fear of God that is connected to our love for our sin. To come near to God means the giving up of our idols. And we love our idols. In our sin we prefer the darkness of our prison to the bright light of the open sky. We can be sinfully afraid of repentance and holiness.

C.S. Lewis wrote a book called, "The Screwtape Letters." And the premise is that a "senior demon" (Screwtape) is writing to a "rookie demon" (Wormwood) and giving him advice on how to tempt his human assignment. The book is constantly catching you off-guard because it's written from a demon's perspective, which means God is spoken of as "the Enemy" and throughout the book you see all these skewed, perverted interpretations of God's heart and his actions. And part of Lewis's genius is that he shows us that demonic fear and mistrust and animosity toward God flow from a fundamental misunderstanding of God. When you see God as harsh and cruel, then perhaps the best you could offer in a relationship with him is a slavish fear of a master who you secretly despise. No love. No peace. No joy.

Do you see God that way? Is that what drives your religious activity or your running from God? Hear me - this is not the fear of God that we're invited into. This is slavery and it isn't from God, it's from sin.

And Christian, as I talk about this sin-rooted fear, don't fall into the trap of believing you're immune to it. Christians and non-Christians alike can be dogged by a wrong fear of God. We are not immune to bad teaching, or to believing lies whispered to our heart in times of suffering, or the temptations of Satan that can all lead us to sinfully fear God. All of us need an antidote. And the antidote for sinful fear is not to get rid of fear altogether. The antidote for sinful fear is godly fear.

### **Right Fear**

In Jeremiah 32, God gives a promise to his people. He says,

<sup>38</sup> And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. <sup>39</sup> I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. <sup>40</sup> I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.

In the very next chapter God says,

<sup>8</sup> I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. <sup>9</sup> And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.

The scriptures are teaching us, friends, that there is a fear of the Lord that is not opposed to God's grace and goodness. It's a fear of God that attracts us like a magnet to the goodness of God. There is a fear of the Lord that goes hand in hand with a loving, joyful, peaceful relationship with him.

Have you ever been so in love that it feels like fear? You're so achingly drawn to a person that it overwhelms your heart? Charles Spurgeon said that the right fear of God is the, "sort of fear which

has in it the very essence of love, and without which there would be no joy even in the presence of God.”<sup>1</sup> We use the word “love” so flippantly. We say we love french fries one moment and we love our children the next. But the object of our love has something to do with the intensity of our love, right? Well friends, if we love the living, eternal, infinite God, then doesn't it make sense that a right love for him should be a trembling, overwhelmed, fearful kind of love. Right fear of God is not opposed to love. It goes hand in hand with love.

And in the same way, right fear of God is not opposed to joy. Michael Reeves wrote,

“Our delight in God is not intended to be lukewarm. Our joy in God is, at its purest, a trembling and wonder-filled—yes, fearful— joy. For the object of our joy is so fearfully wonderful. We are made to rejoice and tremble before God, to love and enjoy him with an intensity that is fitting for him.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Gospel-Rooted Fear**

And this is why the gospel is good news, friends. Because you were not made to hide from God or cringe before him like a slave. You were not made for lifeless religion or half-hearted devotion. You were made to be electrifyingly alive in God. You were made to taste his infinite love and joy and peace. You were made to fear God rightly!

But you were dead and blind, a slave to sin, and without hope in the world. You couldn't see God rightly and so you could not fear him rightly. But God, in his love for us, sent his Son Jesus Christ. Colossians 1 says Jesus is the image of the invisible God. What you could not see about the glory of God, Jesus Christ makes known. And his blood has been shed and his body broken for your sin. And he has been raised to life and conquered death and sits enthroned. And as King of all creation and King of all redemption he calls you out of darkness and into his marvelous light. So that you might see him and know him and love him with an overwhelming, trembling, fearful joy. Only the redemption of Jesus can transform our fear of God from a cringing, slavish, resentful dread into an overwhelming, wonder-filled, relationally magnetic fear of God.

Apart from the gospel we can tremble at the transcendent majesty of the Creator. We can panic at the thought that a holy God will be our judge. But in Christ the grace and mercy of God comes into view alongside his majesty and righteousness. In Christ we see the full picture of God's glory: a transcendent Creator who makes himself low to save sinners. A righteous judge who bears the punishment because of his mercy. Only in the gospel are we able to see the full panorama of God and be rightly overwhelmed with holy fear in a way that satisfies the longings of our hearts.

### **III. That We Might Grow In Fear**

So friends, if there is a sinful fear of the Lord that can only be choked out by a right fear of the Lord, then my burden for us is that we would know how to cultivate and grow in a right fear of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, “A Fear to Be Desired,” 94. As quoted in Reeves, “What Does It Mean to Fear the Lord?,” 28.

<sup>2</sup> Reeves, “What Does It Mean to Fear the Lord?,” 32-33.

Proverbs tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And we've said that wisdom is not something that we can download into our lives in five easy steps. Anyone can fall to their knees. Even the demons tremble before God. But the Christian falls to their knees and trembles with wholesome fear because something has happened at a heart level.

Martin Luther was a pious catholic monk who tirelessly disciplined himself to become acceptable to God through his outward acts of obedience, but all his outward efforts only pulled him further and further into a slavishness and resentment toward God. He had the outward appearance of a right fear of God, but inwardly he was empty and anxious and dead. He needed an inward change. And that's what you and I need. We need the Holy Spirit of God to transform our hearts, and the way the Spirit transforms hearts is by the gospel of Christ. Only the message of the gospel can transform cringing fear into loving, trembling, joyful fear. And only that transformed fear will lead to lives that aren't hollow shells, but joyfully solid and genuine in their love for God and obedience to God.

So if you want to grow in a right fear of the Lord, friends, the place to *start* and the place to *stay* is to regularly, habitually marinate your life with opportunities to hear, and consider, and behold God in the gospel. Only at the cross of Jesus Christ can we - all at once - be reminded that our sins are forgiven AND grow in grasping the ugliness and wickedness of our sin. Only in the gospel can we see all at once God's greatness and his goodness. John Bunyan wrote, "Oh! That a great God should be a good God... a good God to an unworthy, to an undeserving, and to a people that continually do what they can to provoke the eyes of his glory; this should make us tremble."<sup>3</sup> The cross of Jesus leads us to the truest expression of the psalmist's prayer: "what is man that you are mindful of him...that you care for him?" (Psalm 8:4).

So - really practically - if the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and if fear of the Lord comes to us as we behold God in the gospel, then I want to exhort you toward beholding God in the gospel on purpose. Regularly and habitually. This is why it isn't legalism for me to call you to read your bible and pray every day. It's love. This is why it isn't legalism for me to say to you "prioritize gathering with God's people in Sundays." Its' not legalism, it's love. Because not orchestrating your life with opportunities to behold God in the gospel means that you are not cultivating a wholesome fear of the Lord. Which means that however free you think you are, your neglect of God and God's people is simply foolishness.

But friends, if we would cultivate together a right fear of the Lord! If the Fear of God defined us as a church, what would happen?

First, it would transform how we relate to God. Some of us would give up running and hiding from God. Some of us would exchange our anemic, life-draining fear of God for an overwhelming, life-giving, joy-inducing fear of him. Frankly, some of us would turn and be saved. And some of us would realize that the life of following Jesus is not built to exist in the realm of the shallow and boring. We would realize that we are not made for passionless performance or detached knowledge of

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<sup>3</sup> John Bunyan, "The Saints Knowledge of Christ's Love," in The Works of John Bunyan. As quoted by Michael Reeves in "What Does It Mean to Fear the Lord?" 51.

abstract truths, but we are made to know God in such a way that our hearts tremble at his beauty and majesty and love. Imagine that kind of fear of God taking root in your life? In our church? In our city?

If we cultivated a right fear of the Lord together not only would it change the way we relate to God, but it would transform the ways we relate to one another. All of a sudden to look at another human being and realize they are made in the image of God - the God who you love with a holy fear - how would that not drive us to care for one another more exuberantly?! How might our care for one another as we seek to kill sin together be transformed? Maybe we might begin to tell one another, "Brother, sister not only does that sin need to die in your life because it's bad for you and for the world. You need to turn from your sin because God is God. And we fear God here. And God is worth obeying with fearful reverence and joy."

The fear of God at Union Church would transform the way we relate to God in our knowledge of him and care for one another in community, and it would transform our missional living. How are the tens of thousands of people in our region who are living like sheep without a shepherd going to be found in the gospel if we will not open our mouths and speak the gospel to them? And yet I know that so many of the people who are close to us and far from God don't hear the gospel from our lips. And yes we want to be wise and culturally contextual and win their trust... but often we don't speak the gospel because we are afraid. We are afraid of the rejection of people, or the ridicule of our culture, or the pressure of our cultural norms, or we're simply just afraid of the yucky feeling it gives our guts. So what if we were to fear God more than we feared man? How might that radically transform the ways we take the gospel to our neighbors and to the nations?

### **Land the Plane**

Friends, walking in wisdom is God's path to flourishing. We're sitting in a series about pursuing wisdom because we desire for you - for all of us together - to flourish. And the path to flourishing and wholeness and the kind of overwhelming love and joy and life to the fullest that you were made for begins with the fear of the Lord.

And while you would never be able to fear God rightly on your own, Jesus has lived in the fear of the Lord as you or I never could, and he is offering you life in him - a path to life and life to the full in him in right fear of the Lord