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**Core Seminar**

**Fear of Man**

**Class 2: What Is the Fear of God?**

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**Open in Prayer**

**Introduction:**

Last week we considered:

- what it means to fear man  
- how this struggle permeates our lives and our culture

- who fears man

- why we fear man

- how Scripture speaks about the fear of man

AND that we fear man because we do not fear God or we do not fear God enough.

So what exactly is the fear of God? That’s our topic for today. After all, for many of us it’s one of the least expected commands in Scripture: “fear…God.” Fear the one who loves you. Fear the one who is most good.

We’ll start by looking to scripture to define the fear of God. Then we’ll ask why we should fear him, why we don’t, what it looks like to fear him. And last, how we can begin to walk in the fear of the Lord.

**1. What does it Mean to Fear God?**

I think that the fear of God is very counterintuitive for us. We know why *some* people should fear him. For example, Hebrews 10:31, “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” But what about Christians? All through the Bible God’s people—his own children—are called on, even commanded, to fear him. What does *that* mean? What does it mean to fear a God who loves us?

Before we get there, let me block out one easy escape hatch from this dilemma. You might say something like this: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). So we simply redefine “fear” in the “fear God” passages to something more like “reverence.” Kind of like you’d reverence an old war hero.

But there’s a few problems in doing that. First, while some passages might lend themselves to that kind of reading, many won’t. For example, in Romans 11 Paul warns the Gentiles against presuming their inclusion in God’s family tree. “So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches [that is, Jews who did not believe], neither will he spare you.” That’s more than just reverence, right?

Second, I worry that if we “solve” the “fear of God” problem too quickly and easily, we miss out on the terror of God (and thus his power), the wrath of God (and thus his justice and mercy), and the awe-inducing holiness of God (and thus his majesty). God is to be feared, and there’s good reason the Bible uses “fear” instead of just “reverence” or “awe.” Sometimes they’re synonyms but oftentimes they’re not.

So what *does* it mean to fear God?

For starters, Scripture holds together the fear of God *and* the love of God. Take Philippians 2:12-13. “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Do you see what’s going on here? God is at work in you. That’s a wonderful thing, right? He’s changing your desires, he’s making you holy, he’s making you into the image of your son. Yet in no way does that conflict with “fear and trembling.” There is a holy fear that should well up inside me when I realize that Almighty God has chosen my life as the canvas for his glory. I tremble as I realize that he’s in control here, not me. This is about his agenda, his good pleasure, not mine. Even though it’s for my good. So that’s concept #1 to help us understand the fear of God. We fear *because* he’s at work for us, because we’re no longer in the drivers seat.

Second concept comes from Nehemiah 1:11. “O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name.” Who *delight* to fear your name. We see this elsewhere in Scripture as well. Fearing God is *delightful*. So not only is fear of God *not* in conflict with God being for us as his children, it’s not in conflict with our joy either.

Let me hit three other passages that explain the fear of God, and then I’ll try to pull this all together.

* Proverbs 28:14, “Blessed is the one who fears the Lord always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity.” Very often in Biblical poetry, one line helps interpret the next by repeating it or giving the opposite. So in this case, “fears the Lord” is the opposite of “hardens his heart.” Which tells us that “fear” includes a component of submission.
* Psalm 31:19, “Oh, how abundant is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you and worked for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of the children of mankind!” Now, we see that part of fearing God is taking refuge in him.
* Psalm 147:11, “the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.” Somewhat similar to the pairing in Psalm 31, but now we see that fearing God isn’t just making God our refuge but making him our hope.

I’ve found John Piper’s image in his book, *The Pleasures of God* to be helpful here. He notes how strange it sounds that we should *fear* and *hope* in God all at the same time. Isn’t it more natural that we would fear one being and so put our hope in another? Piper describes a mountain climber frantically seeking shelter as a deadly storm approaches. His pulse races, the adrenaline is flowing, he’s terrified. Then he finds a hole in the cliff and soon realizes that he’s going to be safe. Same storm, same terror—but now he’s found hope and refuge. Here’s Piper’s explanation:

We should let the experience of hope penetrate and transform the experience of fear. In other words, the kind of fear that we should have toward God is whatever is left of fear when we have a sure hope in the midst of it…

The fear of God is what is left of the storm when you have a safe place to watch right in the middle of it. And in that place of refuge we say, “This is amazing, this is terrible, this is incredible power; Oh, the thrill of being here in the center of the awful power of God, yet protected by God himself!

And so we get an idea of how we feel both hope and fear at the same time. Hope turns fear into a trembling and peaceful wonder; and fear takes everything trivial out of hope and makes it earnest and profound. The terrors of God make the pleasures of his people intense[[1]](#footnote-1).

So let’s us put this together. Fear of God is animated by the power and wrath of God, power and wrath we see most clearly when God judges, even though we know that in Christ that judgment will fall on him instead of us. Fear of God involves humble submission. And knowing both the terror and the love of God, fear of God puts its hope in him, makes him its refuge. And so fear of God, for the Christian, is a delight.

You’ll see a definition there on your handout that tries to capture all of this: fear of God is *Reverent submission that leads to obedient trust and worship.* But even that definition doesn’t capture the *feeling* of the fear of God. After all, the fear of God is better described than defined. Better to read the final chapters of Job, or of Revelation and then turn and marvel that *this* God calls himself our Father.

No surprise then that the fear of God is commanded of everyone. Psalm 33:8*, Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!*

***Any questions?***

So that’s what it means to fear God—something we all should do. But that leads to an important question, which is point two on the next page of your handout: Why? **Why should we fear God?** And as you see there, the answer comes in three categories.

Now, let me pause before we get into this section to acknowledge something. I *assume* that you *want* to fear God. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here. So for the next few minutes, don’t tune me out because you’re already convinced that we should fear God. Instead, look for reasons that can help you fear him more. In fact, I’d suggest you circle one or two of these that you’ll reflect on more this coming week.

First category: as image bearers of the one true God, we were *designed* to fear God.

Genesis 1:26-27 says, *Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

That passage doesn’t explicitly *say* “fear of God”—but that idea is all over it. You see reverent submission? We were designed to serve the one true God. Not just in our actions but in our very being. You were designed in who you are and what you do to show off how amazing God is. You were made in his image. Your very value is derivative of his. And you see worship there? Worship is responding to how amazing God is. Our whole lives, as God’s image bearers, are to be that response. God designed us to live with no shame towards one another, no fear of being exposed or rejected by others. We see in verse 31 of chapter 1 that “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”

That’s the first category. The second? He’s **worthy** of our fear. Worthy of our obedience and worship.

Ps. 89:7 *Who among the heavenly being is like the Lord, a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones and awesome above all who are around him?* He is more awesome than all that surround Him.

Ps. 90:11 *Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?*

We fear God because he is awesome. We fear him especially because he is awesome in his wrath and terror. Moses, who wrote that verse I just read in Psalm 90. Moses certainly saw God’s wrath, directed at the Egyptians, directed at the rebellious people of Israel. He never saw God’s wrath directed at *him*—only his chastising discipline. But seeing God’s anger close up was life-changing. And, no doubt, Moses understood that except for the mercy of God, he deserved to be the object of God’s wrath.

Now, that might lead to another question. “If I’ve been saved from God’s wrath, why should I fear God’s wrath?” Hebrews addresses that several times. One good example is the end of Hebrews 12:

“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” (v. 28-29)

We are grateful for the grace of God that has made us sons and daughters of the King instead of being judged by the King. But that should not short-circuit the right orientation of our lives and affections around the one who is judge of all the earth. He is a consuming fire. He is worthy of our fear—and that both spurs us to worship and protects us from wandering. Again, God is worthy of our fear—even when he has promised us mercy.

Which gets us to our last category: we fear God because it’s **good** for us to fear God.

Ps. 111:10/Prov. 1:7—Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge

Ps. 115:11—He is a help and shield to those who fear Him.

Ps. 115:13—He will bless those who fear Him

Flip open to the inside of your handout and you’ll see many more verses about the blessings that come when we fear God. As you spend time with this Lord this week, I’d encourage you to meditate on a few them.

***Before we move on, are there any questions?***

We have every reason in the world to fear God. But, of course, so often we don’t. Why not? That’s point #3 on your handout: **The Fear of God Lost**.

In short, we don’t fear God because of our choice as the human race to sin. As Paul says in Romans 1:23, we “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” We made the worst exchange imaginable, choosing to reject the worship and fear of God to worship and fear his creation instead. Now, our lives aren’t oriented around him; they’re oriented around things he’s made.

Let’s observe the irony of this for a moment. Who should most fear a God of wrath? Sinners like us, that’s who. But why is it that we *don’t* fear God? Because of our sin. Do you see how amazingly destructive sin is?

Now, what happened when we made that terrible exchange? We see in Genesis 3. Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned, they went into hiding. Why? They were afraid, ashamed in God’s presence (3:10). At the end of the creation account in Genesis 2, we’re told that Adam and Eve were “both naked and were not ashamed” (2:25). They had nothing to hide. But now they—and we—have plenty to hide and so they—and we—are afraid of being exposed.

Not only that, but they’re now alienated from each other. Adam blames his wife for his sin. Part of God’s curse on them is division in their marriage. Fear of rejection. This rejection is so deep that it will lead to legitimate fear of physical harm (Genesis 4:8). Instead of giving life, the image bearers will turn on each other as we see the first act of murder when Cain kills his brother Abel.

I want us to see the Fall for the cataclysmic event in Scripture that it is. It changes everything. The creatures are now naked and exposed. They are living but spiritually dead. They are human and yet have damaged a key piece of what it means to be human. Fear of Man comes because of sin.

And that’s a crucial point for us not to miss. So often, we treat the symptoms of fear of man as they are the main problem. As if the main problem is the person I fear, or the unmet needs that drive my insecurity. But we cannot get our hands around this problem until we understand that at its root is our sin. *We* chose to reject the fear of God. Which means that *we* have now inherited the fear of man. The problem is inside us, not outside us.

And yet, **point 4 on your handout**, as tragic as this is, there is a savior. The problem is inside of us and the solution is outside, in Christ. Jesus feared God perfectly. He did for us what we were created to do. Just as in Adam, we all sinned. So, in Christ, for those who repent and believe, we are made righteous.

That means that even though we were naked as sinners before God, in Christ we are clothed in righteousness. As someone once said, when we try to cover and protect ourselves through fearing others, it’s as though we are holding up pebbles to hide behind. Meanwhile there is a Mount Everest of covering offered to us in Christ.

Believer, meditate on the righteousness and redemption provided through Christ. You should rightly fear God because of how you have rejected him and defamed him. But in Christ, you can fear him now as one who loves you. How amazing is that!

Before we move on, I want to talk together for a bit about this idea that we lost the fear of God because of our sin. ***What can happen when we being to forget this truth that fear of man came because of our choice to sin?***

Well, we’ve defined the fear of God. We’ve asked why we should fear him and why we don’t. Now, as we wrap up today’s class, what does the fear of God look like? **That’s point #5 in your handout.**

One thing we see in Scripture are descriptions of the fear of God in action. I won’t read them all now but here’s a quick overview. What does it look like to fear the Lord? It looks like giving praise, listening to truth, being quiet and teachable, having an undivided heart, following his precepts, hoping in his word, understanding his statutes, standing in awe of his law, walking in his ways, being humble, hating evil, and walking upright…

The fear of God works itself out in the lives of people.

But of course the Bible doesn’t simply give us descriptions. It gives us examples. **Can anyone think of good examples in the Bible of people who feared God more than man? Just call them out.**

*(READ if more examples are required)*

***Examples of those who feared God***

Noah (Genesis 6:22), even though we don’t have specific accounts of what men might have been saying to Noah, we can only imagine the degree to which Noah was fearing God over man as he worked over the course of decades to construct a very large boat in his front yard.

Daniel (and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego), there are examples throughout this book: the decision to not partake of the king’s meat and drink, the decision to not bow down to the false idol (3:16-18), Daniel’s decision to defy the edict to stop worshiping God, Daniel’s fearlessness in interpreting dreams.

Esther (Esther 5:1-8), in the face of Haman’s wicked plot to destroy God’s people, Esther approached King Xerxes, knowing that her actions could lead to her own death.

Ruth (Ruth 2:11-12), when Ruth went to work in the fields, she was risking physical/sexual abuse.

Rahab (Joshua 2) worked to hide the Israelite spies, and didn’t give into the same fear that the rest of the people of Jericho had been controlled by. Also she didn’t fear the authorities within Jericho; she feared the God of Israel.

Mary (Luke 1:46-55) praises the Lord as she recounts His goodness and speaks of her fear of the Lord and her joy in carrying the very Son of God in her womb.

Paul follows the Lord faithfully from his conversion until his death at the hands of Nero as he demonstrates what it means to fear the Lord as he proclaims the gospel to the gentiles.

The women who went to the tomb.

Peter [later] (Acts 10:9-11:18), God turns Peter from a man-pleasing, man-fearing individual, into one who defies everything that would have previously defined him, and he goes to the house of Cornelius. (I Peter 3-4) Peter, the one who feared, is now admonishing believers throughout the ages to not fear, but to trust the God that he has come to see as supremely faithful and trustworthy and worthy of being feared above all else.

Jesus

Read Hebrews 11 as the writer recounts the heroes of the faith from the Old Testament who feared God as demonstrated by their faith. But, it doesn’t stop with the Scriptures. Church history is replete with men and women who have faithfully followed God to advance His kingdom.

In history:

Polycarp and other martyrs in the early church as they bravely faced death and proclaimed the goodness and sweetness of Christ before those who would kill them.

Luther as he bravely stood before the ecclesiastical authorities of his day to proclaim the great truth of justification by faith ALONE!

Jim Elliot bravely went to the jungles of South America and gave his life proclaiming the gospel to native Indian tribes far removed from civilization.

Brothers and Sisters around the world even today being killed for their faith.

OK then. Some great examples. How do *we* do that? How can we grow in the fear of the Lord? Back of your handout.

Only a greater fear will drive out a lesser fear. We worship that which we fear the most. Our main concern should not be “finding solutions” to our fear of man, but instead seeking after a deeper fear of the Lord. I think this orientation is so important. If you leave this class feeling less controlled by what other people think, but with no greater fear of God, then you’ve missed the point! Our goal is not simply to escape the fear of man, but to fear God.

So how do we grow in the fear of the Lord? We’ll spend more time on this later in the class, but here’s a quick summary:

1. Learn about who the Bible teaches that God is. And don’t shy away from those passages that describe his justice, his wrath, his power, his anger against sin. Sometimes as Christians we can focus mainly on trying to reconcile those passages with God’s love. Which is a good thing! But if that’s all we do, we lose a powerful thrust of the Bible that helps us grow in the fear of the Lord. Quoting Hebrews 12 again, “our God is a consuming fire.”

The God of the Bible is revealed as:

* 1. Holy
  2. Majestic
  3. Sovereign
  4. Omnipotent - all powerful
  5. Omniscient - all knowing
  6. Omnipresent - everywhere, always present
  7. Merciful
  8. Kind
  9. Faithful
  10. Loving
  11. Jealous
  12. Just and Wrathful

A few books, apart from Scripture, that provide great starting points to knowing and understanding God better. *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer and *The Pleasures of God* by John Piper.

1. Along those lines, observe God’s goodness in the Bible and in your life. As you’ll recall from the beginning of our class today, fear of God for the Christian is not simply fear of the storm, but fear of the storm when you know you’re safe. The more you are overwhelmed both by God’s terror *and* by God’s goodness, the more you will fear him rightly.
2. Don’t run away from your own sin. Instead of minimizing our sin, becoming defensive, deciding to just “forget and move on”—we need to honestly confess our sin before God. Consider carefully the root of your sin in your heart. And then run to the cross for forgiveness. By better understanding your sin, you will better understand God’s love for you and you will grow in your fear of Him.
3. Repent of pride (Prov. 3:7). I can’t say this enough! Our pride goes deeper than any of us could imagine. It is rooted in the very fabric of who we are as rebels against God. Pride. It completely distorts reality as it tempts us to make much of ourselves and so very little of the sovereign God.

***Questions?***

[if time: ***how have you grown in the fear of the Lord?***]

***Conclusion***

To fear God is to reverently submit to Him in such a way that leads to obedience and worship. It is to happily and joyfully obey Him. To fear God is the beginning of wisdom. God alone can bear the weight of your deepest longings. He alone can receive the worship you were created to give. So let us fear Him!

1. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, Pages 198ff, 2000 edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)