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**Core Seminar**

**Fear of Man**

**Class 3: Fear of Exposure, Rejection, Harm**

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**Opening**

The last two weeks, we’ve looked at the fear of man generally and then the ultimate cure for the fear of man—the fear of the Lord. Today, we’re going to look at what the fear of man is more specifically. We’ll look at three common forms of fear of man: fear of exposure, fear of rejection, and fear of harm.

And our goal is to see change in our lives. To escape from the fear of man and learn to fear God. Of course, as I consider the pervasive nature of the fear of man in my heart… How it seems to be woven in the fabric of my being… change may seem unlikely, if not impossible.

But Christ comforts us in Luke 18: What is impossible with men is possible with God. With that hope in our hearts, let’s pray. [**Pray**]

**Introduction**

The first form of fear of man that we’ll consider today is fear that others will expose us. This is really the most fundamental way in which we fear other people. And this struggle is something we can trace all the way back to the Fall of the human race in Genesis 3. Fear of exposure was the immediate result of Adam and Eve’s sin. The first consequence of their sin was a feeling of shame—which immediately led them to hide from God. They were afraid of being exposed, and since the Fall this has become one of the most fundamental features of being human. Yet as Christians we recognize that it was not the way we were meant to be.

How does this play out in your life and mine? Well the easy question is, “What do I most fear other people finding out about?”

Next, consider fear of rejection. In *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, Ed Welch says, “Closely related to the fear that people will expose us is perhaps the most common reason we are controlled by other people: they can reject, ridicule, or despise us (rejection-fear). They don’t invite us to the party. They ignore us. They don’t like us. They aren’t pleased with us. They withhold the acceptance, love, or significance we want from them. As a result, we feel worthless.”

Often, in my own heart, I’ll make a rapid calculation of what will make me look best, what will make me look most important and most respectable. That’s fear of rejection.

Third and finally is fear of harm. Of course, all these can be related. Fear of harm may be woven into fear of exposure or fear of rejection. The solution to all these fears is the same – fearing God. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus tells us “*do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”* But of course, we *do* fear harm—not merely in the sense that is good, but in the sense that Jesus is talking about—fearing harm more than God. Which can have pretty devastating consequences for our lives.

In fact, that’s the problem with all three of these forms of fear of man. A perceived need trumps our fear of God—and we begin to serve something other than God. We begin to worship something other than God.

So let me give you a preview of where we’re going today. We’ll start by asking the question, “why do we fear?” That is, why do these fears the fear of the Lord? Then we’ll step through each of these three to consider what they look like. That means that today’s class is more descriptive than prescriptive. We looked last week at the fear of God, which is the ultimate solution to these issues. The next three weeks we’ll look at the solution to the fear of Man. Today’s class is mainly about identifying where in our hearts these fears lie.

That means that you’ll need to be unusually self-reflective as you listen today. My goal isn’t for you to just learn about these fears generally—but how they appear in your heart. So we’re going to start with two minutes of quiet so you can take stock of your own heart. You’ll see a space there in the handout. I’ll set my watch, give you two minutes. In that time I want you to write out the main ways in which fear of exposure, fear of rejection, and fear of harm tend to become controlling factors in your life. At the end of the class, we’ll revisit the same question and you can see if you’ve made any progress in that self-diagnosis.

*Two minutes of silence*

**II. Why Do We Fear Exposure, Rejection, and Harm?**

All three of these fears stem from a concern that we, as we really are, are not safe. If people really knew who we were, they would despise us (fear of exposure). If people don’t accept us, our real value will be seen for what it is (fear of rejection). Left to ourselves, we will be hurt by others (fear of harm).

Now, to understand why we fear in a wrong way, it’s important to begin by considering why we fear in a right way. I mentioned this a minute ago, but let’s get a little further in. In what way are these fears appropriate?

Well, for starters, Scripture describes various ways in which we should seek to please others and gain their approval. Which is a common tool we use to avoid exposure, rejection, harm.

1. A desire for honor that is not greater than love for others, love for God and desire to obey Him. Proverbs 15:33.
2. As much as it is required for Gospel ministry and proclamation, I Timothy 3:2,7. As Christians, we should seek to have a good reputation with outsiders.
3. In relation to pleasing and respecting parents and authorities, it is not only appropriate but also commanded. (Ex. 20:12, Prov. 16:14-15, Titus 2:9-10).
4. If you’re married, it’s right for you to seek to please your spouse. If you are married, or if you become married, this relationship supersedes all others[[1]](#footnote-1).
5. It’s right to deny yourself for the sake of not offending a weaker brother (Romans 15).

Beyond all that, fear can keep us safe. I think that’s most obvious regarding fear of harm. Because you fear for safety, you’re careful where you walk at night—which is generally a good thing. Because we fear for safety, we’re very careful about our policies and procedures in children’s ministry. Because you fear for safety, you protect your family.

But all that said, these fears can become controlling. Why is that?

Well, bottom line, sin. Both our own sin and the sin of others. The great promise of sin, Genesis 3:5, was that “your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God”—as the serpent said. You will be independent of God, self-sufficient in your own right. But what in fact does sin do? The very opposite. It makes us afraid, because it makes us insufficient. It is *sin* that makes us fear exposure, knowing deep inside that we aren’t good enough. It is *sin* that leads us to reject others, and sin that fears they have good reason to reject *us.* Because we know the truth about ourselves and that truth isn’t pretty. And it’s *sin* that’s underneath the harm we receive from others as they, to quote James 4, “fight and quarrel” because they “desire and do not have.” It’s also sin—separation from God—that leads us to distrust him so that we fear harm more than we fear him.

This is so different from how the world sees things! The world would say that the basic problem here is our circumstances. Fear comes either because people need to treat us better or because we need to have a more optimistic view of ourselves. But you see how wrongheaded that is. The solution to fear of man is not to pretend that we are not sinful people in a sinful world. Instead, it is to understand the goodness and justice of the God who ordains all that happens to us sinful people in that sinful world.

So how does that surface in each of these three categories of fear? We’ll use the rest of our time to step through them one by one.

***Questions?***

**III. Fear of Exposure**

Ed Welch says, “Everyday is Halloween. Putting on our masks is a regular part of our morning ritual, just like brushing our teeth and eating breakfast. … Underneath the masks are people who are terrified that there will be an unveiling. And, indeed, the masks and other coverings will one day be removed. If we feel exposed by people, we will feel devastated by God … one way to avoid God’s eyes is to live as if fear of other people is our deepest problem—they are big, not God” (Page 33).

And this is the problem we all face. We fear being exposed because we are sinful. We don’t want people to see us for who we truly are.

*What does this fear look like?* A few things.

First, we hide and cover, like Adam and Eve after the Fall, from the gaze of God and of people. For example, fear of exposure can be underneath a tendency to idolize work. Why is it so hard to say “no” when the boss asks you to take a special assignment? Because you’re not sure if the real you, absent the “fabulous employee label” is really OK.

Second, we escape. Maybe you excessively daydream or fantasize. Maybe you lose yourself in the Internet, maybe you have a particular food or eating habit you turn to. Maybe you turn to television, or maybe books. I think it can be quite insightful when we connect this desire to escape with its underlying fear of being exposed.

Third, we seek to expose others*.* The great irony is that we often find pleasure in seeing others uncovered and exposed. My shame is diminished (at least in my own mind) when compared to someone else’s.

David Wells says in *Losing our Virtue*, “Television and the movies have … tilted the scales away from privacy toward exposure, away from bodily modesty toward public nakedness … we want to see the family whose son was murdered. We want to watch their grief, and we think we have a right to know what they know and to see how they are feeling. And in movies, the American public wants to see nudity and wants to watch people having sex. A sense of shame that once would have stood guard over what is private and intimate is now largely gone, routed by our inclination to share and our voyeuristic hunger to watch.”

So *where* do these tendencies show up?

* In private, as you do things you’d be embarrassed for others to discover.
* At home, in close relationships. The closer you become to a person, the more you can fear that they will one day see you for who you really are.
* At work—when you have that gnawing fear that your boss will figure out you’re not as competent as she thinks. That can really show up when you fail at something—with an emotional response way bigger than seems necessary.
* This shows up even at church—maybe especially at church. We wear masks to impress others and so we’re desperately afraid we’ll be unmasked.

*The answer*

What’s the answer to fear of exposure? The answer begins with bad news: that God knows everything. Hebrews 4:13, “no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” And yet that same God takes away our sin and our shame. Hebrews 10:12, unlike the priests of the Old Testament who merely covered over the sin of God’s people, “when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.” By trusting in Christ, he doesn’t provide mere covering for our shame; he takes it on himself, away from us.

So that’s fear of exposure. Next…

**IV. Fear of Rejection**

We fear rejection for who we are: personality, education, job title, socioeconomic position, gender, race, experiences, relationships. You change your personality because you think people will like you better. You seek after a certain degree or job title so that you can be accepted. You fear discrimination because of your race or gender. You fear being rejected by certain people because of the friends you’ve chosen.

Fear of rejection is manifest by an overwhelming desire for approval. So how does this show up? You see a long list in your handout.

*Fishing for compliments*. We put ourselves down, hoping people will disagree. We ask for critique hoping we’ll get praise. We try to keep conversation on topics where we’ll likely be complimented. We praise others hoping they’ll reciprocate[[2]](#footnote-2). Yet Proverbs 25:27 tells us, “It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glory to search out one’s own glory.”

*Perfectionism*. How much of your being overwhelmed, overextended, or busy comes from perfectionism? And how much of perfectionism comes not from a desire for excellence but a desire for approval?

*Going along with the crowd*. And that crowd doesn’t have to be large. Parents: it’s good to resist your kids falling into this trip. And kids: trust your parents. They’re protecting you from foolish decisions and they’re teaching you what it means to live in the fear of God and not peers, even if it means not being the most popular person today.

Sometimes that’s not so much teenage peer pressure as it is a desire to be part of an “inner circle.” Is part of your identity wrapped up in being on the inside—be it in this church or your social circle or at work? Or are you angry that you feel excluded from such a group?

*Not sharing the gospel*. Because we’re afraid of how someone will respond. As Ed Welch says, “Sometimes we would prefer to die for Jesus than to live for him…Aren’t the most popular mission trips the ones that take us far from our own neighborhood? Russia is easy,” your neighbors…different story.

Along those lines, fear of rejection keeps us from *confronting sin* in others.

*Passivity* in relationships is another indicator of this fear. We wait for others to initiate with us, for example, to serve, to love, to reconcile. To sooth that inner fear that no one wants us.

Or maybe you’re a member of this church and you do certain things, say certain things, or spend time with certain people because you believe those are the things that are necessary to be a good member in the eyes of others? Do you do your good works for God or for man? I want to be careful here and say that the answer here is not to stop doing the right things. Instead, pray for a heart that desires obedience for love of God rather than a heart that fears rejection and desires approval from man.

Finally, many types of speech demonstrate a fear of rejection. Gossip, saying behind someone’s back something you would never say to his face. Or its subtle twin, flattery, saying to someone’s face something you would never say behind his back. Lying, blame-shifting, self-justifying, manipulation—these are all types of communication that flow out of a fear of rejection and desire for acceptance.

*Fear of rejection hurts us*

Besides the fact that giving into the fear of rejection is opposed to the fear of the Lord, fear of rejection can really hurt us. How?

1. It enslaves us to others. Priolo says, “Being a people-pleaser is like having a little handle on your back that others can grab hold of to push you and pull you in all directions.”
2. Love for praise actually undermines our receiving it. Priolo, again, says, “Those from whom you long to receive honor and those whom you desire to impress will eventually be offended (if not repulsed) by the pride that generates your lust.”
3. We forego heavenly rewards.
4. It blinds us to our own sins.
5. It makes us susceptible to flattery and deceit.
6. It causes us to be more susceptible to other sins. Hypocrisy, discontentment, greed, timidity, unteachability, indecision, etc.
7. It can take a physical and psychological toll: stomach problems, stress and tension, headaches, fatigue, depression, mood shifts, and so forth.

*Jesus was rejected*

So what’s the Bible’s answer to our fear of rejection? It’s to be honest that, yes, we deserve to be rejected. Not rejected from the little league team or the high school prom or the flower club, but rejected by God. And yet…Jesus was rejected so that we might be accepted. “He was despised and rejected by men,” Isaiah 53. So he is able to fully empathize with our own rejection, Hebrews 4. And because of his rejection, we are accepted by God, Ephesians 2.

**V. Fear of Harm**

Lastly, let’s take a few minutes to consider our third category of fear of man, fear of harm. What is fear of harm? Well, to start out there’s…

*Fear of Physical Harm*

Some of the most difficult and painful physical harm takes place in the family. Whether between spouses, parents and children, or other family relationships, physical harm in this context can cause some of the most difficult struggles post-abuse. Precisely because it took place in the context of relationships that should be characterized by the highest levels of trust, love, and vulnerability.

Sexual exploitation, whatever its form is another way in which we can fear others in this way, and again this may be influenced by your own experience.

Bullying is another example of how we fear physical harm from others. Some of this may seem to be an innocuous part of childhood. But even in how we instruct our children in dealing with other physically violent children, we can teach them to fear the Lord more than people.

Those of you who have served or are serving in the military or policy and security forces may fear physical harm, because you put yourself in harm’s way.

Persecution/physical suffering for the Gospel is another common fear. Are you afraid to go to certain parts of the world because of fear of physical harm?

Terrorism. In a world where terror attacks are increasingly frequent and well-publicized, this can become paralyzing.

How about racism? This fear of man may manifest itself both in fear of physical harm and/or fear of rejection. Are there certain people that you fear physical harm from simply because of the color of their skin or their ethnic background? Do you feel “safer” or less safe around people that have a particular skin color? Do you carry that fear into your relationships with other brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you allow that fear to keep you from loving your neighbor as Christ commanded?

But *physical* harm isn’t the only fear we have to grapple with. There’s also…

*Fear of Non-Physical Harm*

It’s simply not true that “sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me.”

A verbally abusive boss or spouse or parent will produce the same type of fear of man that the physical acts of harm will also produce. The emotional and psychological burden can be crushing.

Sexual harassment can also fall into this category.

With any of these issues, I’m not in any way suggesting that Scripture says we should stay in abusive situations. Certainly if you’re in a situation like this, you should speak to an elder or another brother/sister you trust.

As we consider proper responses to these situations, we may need to pray for the strength to show love and gentleness to the person we fear. In other cases, we may need to speak very direct and truthful words. Those who fear being harmed are often tempted to either be silent or angry in response. The Gospel calls us to something else.

*How does fear of harm affect us?*

What are some of the ways that our lives are shaped by this type of fear of man?

Well if the fear is based in past experience of physical harm, there can be the very real fear that they will be hurt again. This fear can be paralyzing.

There can be a perpetual sense of being a victim… a temptation to place blame for all future difficulties on those past experiences. Being a victim can become your identity.

For those who have been abused, there’s sometimes a temptation to think you deserved it. Let me take this opportunity to reject that lie. If you have ever thought, “I deserved the hurt that I received from others because I’m bad person or God is angry with me,” please hear me. That’s a lie. There is no evil in God’s wrath. If you are abused, it’s wrong. We do not deserve injustice.

Related to this experience is Self-pity. Thoughts like, “It would be so much easier for me to trust the Lord if only I hadn’t experienced this.” But like pride, self-pity is self-focused and seeks trust in self instead of God.

Those are some internal effects. How does fear of harm affect our relationships?

First, a cloud of shameful feelings may plague the person who’s experienced physical harm in the past. Yes, shame comes when we sin—but this is more complicated. The person who’s been sinned against may feel a need to identify some way they deserved to be sinned against. How twisted Satan’s lies are!

The person struggling with this fear of man is also likely to struggle with trusting others. The more we fear the less we’ll love.

Lastly, bitterness is a deeper sense of some of these other things. When we fail to repent of these wrong responses, they can grow into bitterness towards others and maybe even towards God Himself.

*Gospel Response*

Our culture generally opts for one of two different responses to a history of harm. One the one hand is the victim response; on the other hand is the stoic response.

* The victim says, “I have a right to feel this way because of what he or she did to me.”
* The stoic sees it as a sign of weakness to ever admit fear. If I admit that I fear physical harm from others, doesn’t this open me up to what I fear?

But neither response is a gospel response. What is a gospel response? Three important truths:

1. First, recognize that the worst harm has already been experienced: Christ’s atoning death for sins that He did not commit, in fact sins that those He created and sinned against Him committed. Yet, in giving His life, He didn’t fear the imminent physical harm from His creatures, but He trusted and feared His Father. Those of us who have experienced physical harm from others are able to more clearly understand how Christ suffered in this particular way.
2. Second, that Christ who loved us by suffering the ultimate harm? He is the one who is in control of everything. As Spurgeon put it, “God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart.” A gospel response to harm is to recognize that, though we cannot explain it and cannot justify it, we can trust God that his purposes are greater, and better, than ours.
3. Third, the compassion that sees those who do harm as injured by the harm they do. As Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.” For those who do harm, *their* fear of man is likely a huge piece of that. They need the gospel, not our fear.

**VI. Conclusion**

So then, fear of exposure, fear of rejection, fear of harm. To finish out, let’s take sixty seconds and revisit what you wrote down earlier. Any new ways that you see these three forms of fear of man surfacing in your life? You’ll see space for that at the end of your handout.

-Wait sixty seconds-

Close in prayer.

1. Regarding the nature of how one should rightly seek approval of one’s spouse according to I Corinthians 7:32-34, Priolo says, “The Greek word used in verse 33, which is translated ‘to please,’ is a word that has several nuances of meaning. Its root means ‘to fit in with.’ It can also men ‘to conform,’ ‘to adapt,’ ‘to satisfy,’ ‘to soften one’s heart to,’ ‘to meet with one’s approval’ or ‘to accommodate.’ The word implies a preexisting relationship between the one doing the pleasing and the one being pleased. While an unmarried Christian should have his mind focused almost exclusively on how he may please the Lord, the attention of a married Christian must be focused not only on pleasing the Lord, but also on pleasing spouse. The Bible assumes that all married persons will have their interests divided between pleasing Christ, which is always top priority, and pleasing their spouses.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From Lou Priolo, *People Pleasing* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)