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**Core Seminar**

**Fear of Man**

**Class 4: What Do We Need?**

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**Open in Prayer**

**I. Introduction**

We began this class by looking at the fear of man, then the opposite of the fear of man—our right orientation—the fear of God. Last week, we pulled fear of man apart a bit more to study fear of exposure, fear of rejection, and fear of harm.

You’ll remember how I explained that last week’s class was largely *de*scriptive, not *pre*scriptive. I wanted you to see some of the ways that *you* struggle with these forms of the fear of man.

Well, today we begin to move from description to prescription. And to do that, we’re going to answer what would seem to be a very basic question: what do we need?

Why focus on that question? Because confusion about what we really need lies at the heart of many forms of the fear of man. Let’s take our three examples from last week.

That’s most clear for fear of rejection. Maybe you read the book “How to Eat Fried Worms” when you were growing up? The protagonist, Billy, takes a bet to eat ten worms in one day because he’s trying to fit in at a new school. His ridiculous worm adventure begins because he feels he needs friends—and he’ll do whatever it takes to get them. Of course, in the book, the strategy works. Billy eats the worms; he gets the friends. Doesn’t work that way in real life. At least, the part about that strategy working. The part about doing ridiculous things to avoid rejection because we desperately need to feel included and loved—well, that’s just standard human experience. It’s amazing how quickly a perceived need to be loved by others turns into control by others—which is precisely the opposite of love!

Fear of harm also comes from a poor answer to the question “what do I need?” Nothing wrong with wanting to stay safe. But once we put safety into the “need” category instead of the “strong desire” category, we can begin to fear harm more than we fear God—and thus to serve that fear more than we serve God.

And, of course, fear of exposure works the same way. There’s nothing wrong with a desire for modesty and privacy. But fear of exposure isn’t a right ordering of our fears—it’s an idolatrous sense that at all costs, I must keep my reputation intact. I’m afraid of what will happen if people understand who I really am. Reputation has become a need.

So do you see the connection? Fear of man often comes from a misunderstanding of what we really need. So moving from fear of man to fear of God has a lot to do with getting the right answer to the question, “what do I need?”

**II. Wrong Answers**

Of course, often getting the right answer starts out with blocking out the wrong answers. And I think there are some wrong answers to the “what do I need” question that hit painfully close to home.

Let me give us three wrong answers to our question.

1. The ascetic answer. Basically, I don’t have any needs. Buddhism is actually the classic form of this answer: happiness lies in ultimately abandoning any desire, and so long as I have no desire, I can never be disappointed. **Can anyone tell me why that’s not a Christian answer to our question?**
2. The hedonist answer. Kinda the opposite. I assume that whatever I want is what I need, and so I pursue what I want with abandon. A bit like the teacher in Ecclesiastes. I know it seems ridiculous for Christians to subscribe to that—but think of how often we turn wants into needs. “I want a vacation” becomes “I need a vacation.” “I want respect” becomes “I need respect.” We’re so quick to turn strongly held, even good desires, into needs on the same level as biological needs like food and water. Putting us roughly in the hedonist category.
3. A combination of the two. I think this is often where we really live. We basically divide up our desires into two categories. Those we will deny and those we will treat as needs. There’s no Scriptural basis for doing that—just a determination of which we feel we can live with and which we can’t.

The Christian life is not ascetic. It’s not hedonistic either. And it’s not some convenient combination of the two. So what does the Bible say that we need?

**III. What Is A Need?**

What do you need? It’s a very tangled question. If you were lost in the desert and I asked you want you need, you’d probably say “water.” Which would be quite true! If I ask you that in a Sunday School class like this, you probably say “Jesus.” If you’re in the middle of an argument with your roommate, you might say, “someone who listens to me.” If someone were to ask you that in a reflective conversation over a cup of coffee, who knows what you would answer. “Respect, love, understanding…self-esteem, obedient kids, safety, control, excitement”—the sky’s the limit!

That list of what we need, Ed Welch writes, “is limited only by human imagination and desires. Welcome to the word ‘need,’ one of the more confusing terms in the English language. Everyone uses it, but it can express ideas that are completely unrelated[[1]](#footnote-1)”—from water to Jesus to understanding.

So let’s look at three different categories of need.

First are *biological* needs. Which Scripture talks about frequently. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us not to worry about what we will eat or what we will wear because “your heavenly Father knows that you need them” (Matt. 6:32). Not a denial of the need, not even a promise of provision, but a promise that God knows. Biological needs are pretty straightforward: things you need to stay alive.

Now, one complication is that this category is so uncontroversial, it’s tempting to relabel other things as “biological needs” too. “Consider the popular ‘I need sex.’ When this is elbowed out of the category of desire and lust into the biological, the assumption is that sex is a biological need, nearly identical to food and water.[[2]](#footnote-2)” Then what do you make of the Bible’s prohibitions of sex outside of marriage?

Next category is also a familiar one to students of the Bible: *spiritual* needs. Scripture is pretty ruthless in describing our spiritual needs. We are *dead* in our trespasses and sins, Ephesians 2. As helpless as an abandoned baby, Ezekiel 16. We are slaves to sin, Romans 6. Of course, the great news here is that God has not abandoned us to our needs but has provided everything we need in Christ. 2 Peter 1:3, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.”

Third category is a bit more sticky: *psychological needs*. “The list of psychological needs can be a long one, but they typically have to do with what we want in relationships: significance, acceptance, respect, admiration, love, belonging, meaning, and so on. Some people collapse this long list into one: the need for love[[3]](#footnote-3).”

Very often, we treat psychological needs as just as basic to human existence as biological needs. From a Christian perspective, we would say that God himself is a relational being, having existed in perfect fellowship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from eternity past. So when he created mankind in his image, he created us to be relational beings. It was not good, after all, for man to be alone (Genesis 1). As a result, we *need* to be loved, accepted, valued, in order to feel good about ourselves, to be happy, to feel fulfilled.

You might describe this as the “love cup” model of humanity. If we are loved, our love cups are full and we are happy, loving others. If we’re not, we’re empty cups and unable to be who we’re supposed to be.

Now, some Christians would look at that and note that it makes us quite dependent on our fellow human beings. And anytime we need anything other than God, it places us in a dangerous, idolatrous situation. So they would basically agree with the main premise—that we need love—but would stress that Christ’s love for us completely fulfills that need. “We’re married to Christ,” you might hear someone say. “So we don’t need anyone else.”

**IV. Problems with the Love Cup Theory**

Now, as you can imagine from how I’ve described this, there’s some pretty serious flaws with the “love cup” theory—whether you describe it straight up or use the modified “Jesus meets all my psychological needs” version. Let me give you three problems with this way of looking at things.

1. First, the love cup theory makes it seem like unfulfilled desire is at least as much a cause of our sinful behavior as our sinful hearts. For example, let’s say that someone struggles with sinful, angry outbursts. But when you confront them about it, they point somewhere else as the underlying cause. “My wife doesn’t respect me. She doesn’t love me. That’s why I have such a short fuse.”

But we understand from the Bible that the cause of sin is sin. If you classify your wife respecting you as a desire—and a very good desire—then when that desire is unmet, you will be *disappointed*. Which may lead you to be tempted toward anger. But if you flare up in your anger, that’s because of sin. On the other hand, if you classify your wife respecting you as a need, then when that need is denied you are *understandably* angry. That minimizes the “against-God” nature of sin and encourages blame-shifting[[4]](#footnote-4).

1. Second, the love cup model doesn’t entirely fit with how the Bible describes our motivation to love. We’re not called to love people because they need our love—much less because by loving them they’ll love us back and meet our need for love. Instead, as 1 John 4:19 says, “we love because he first loved us.” Though even that can be misinterpreted. It’s not as if we say, “Jesus has loved me, which has now met my need for love, so I am now free to love others.” That is, the modified, Jesus-fied love cup theory. No—the Bible’s view of our loving because Christ loved us is less freedom and more compulsion. Listen for example to Paul’s explanation of his love in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” Or Luke 7:47, “he who has been forgiven little loves little.” But he who is forgiven much loves much. If you’ve been forgiven by God, you cannot help but love God. A lack of love for God is either the sign of a heart that remains unforgiven or a heart that’s ignorant of how much it’s been forgiven. But forgiveness drives us to love.

We don’t sit back, waiting until our psychological needs are met—by Jesus or anyone else—before we move forward in love; we love because he first loved us. We love because we can’t help but love. His love compels us!

1. Third, the love cup model takes the command to love others, and then turns it around to say that we need to be loved. Kind of like the husband demanding that his wife respect him since she’s commanded to in Ephesians 5. To act as if I’ve been wronged when others don’t love me just isn’t Biblical. Better to say they have a need to love me than that I have a need to be loved. What would happen if you used that same line of thought with the command to “consider others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3)? That you gave a God-given need to feel more important than others? Clearly, that doesn’t work.

Of course, this all might be sounding a little too close to the Buddhist version of the Christian life that I critiqued earlier. As if the answer is to pretend like we’re dependent on no one, that we need nothing relationally. But that’s going too far. What I’m trying to get us away from is some sense that we have psychological needs that are entirely analogous to biological needs. Where if I don’t get something from someone else, it’s impossible for me to be happy and healthy.

That’s where it’s important to introduce the difference between a need and a desire. Much of what our modern culture views as psychological *needs* are actually *desires*. Good desires, reasonable desires—but desires, not needs. You can really see the difference between a desire and a need in how you react when you don’t get what you want. When someone deprives you of something you desire, you’re disappointed. You’re sad. But when someone deprives you of something you think you *need*—you’re a lot more than disappointed. You’re mad. Because now this is an issue of justice, not preference. Ed Welch puts it well: “When we have a *desire* for respect and we don’t receive it, we are hurt. If we have a *need* for respect, we are devastated or angry[[5]](#footnote-5).”

If love from other people was a need, one way you’d expect that to show up in the Bible would be in the numerous prayers recorded in Scripture. But while we see many prayers for biological needs and for spiritual needs, what we don’t see are prayers for psychological needs. Take the Lord’s prayer as an example. Matthew 6:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
    on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our debts,  
    as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
    but deliver us from evil.

Does Jesus think our needs are important? Absolutely! We pray for our daily bread, we pray for forgiveness, we pray for deliverance from evil. Biological needs, spiritual needs. But what is lacking is any recognition that we are needy in relation to one another. Instead of enshrining our demand to be loved, Scripture simply tells us to love—because of the love we’ve already received.

**Questions so far?**

**What are some common ways that we act as if we have a psychological deficit that must be filled with love?**

**What are some ways that what I’ve been saying could be misunderstood?**

**V. Who Are You?**

We can’t leave things there, though. I might have been able to argue that the Bible doesn’t embrace the “love cup” model of human psychology. But I haven’t told you what to do with those feelings that you have. That desire for safety that, when threatened, shows up as fear of exposure, fear of rejection, fear of harm. We fear people because they can expose and humiliate us. We fear people because they can reject, ridicule, or despise us. We fear people because they can attack or threaten us. What do we do with that?

Well, to figure that out we need to understand what our ultimate purpose is in life. After all, the fear of man equation is, “if I can’t have X, then I can’t be happy.” Or “if Y happens, then I’ll be devastated. I’ll never be OK.” Both of which assume a purpose statement for life: to be happy, to be OK. So what is God’s purpose statement for our lives?

Think back to Genesis 1. God creates all living things “after their own kinds.” That is, every apple patterned after another apple, every zebra after another zebra. But when it comes time to create human beings, things are different. Genesis 1:26,

26Then 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.”

27So God created man in his own image,  
    in the image of God he created him;  
    male and female he created them.

We’re made in *God’s* image, in *God’s* likeness. An image of God that is like God. What does it mean to image God? It means to reflect him—that our very being proclaims something about who he is. Your purpose as a created being is to show off the glory and goodness of God. As a human being, you do that by acting like God, by imitating him. By loving others, by showing mercy, by creating, by teaching. But you are not just a human being, you are a *redeemed* human being who is being remade into the image of Christ. As a Christian, then, you show off the glory of God not merely by being human but also as your new heart—a heart of faith—changes you. As an image-bearer, your life shows off the power and wisdom of God. As a redeemed image-bearer, your life shows off the mercy and grace of God as well.

William Shakespeare wrote that “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players[[6]](#footnote-6).” So much more true than he probably meant it! Your purpose in life is to show off the excellence of our great God in this stage play of life. Your happiness, your fulfillment, your usefulness may all play a part in that. But happiness, fulfillment, productivity…none of those are your ultimate purpose. Your ultimate purpose is to show off, to image, your creator and redeemer.

**VI. What Do We Really Need?**

When we answer the question “what do we need,” then, we need to answer it in terms of that purpose God’s given us. “What do we need”…to who off the excellence and glory and goodness of God?

Our biological needs fit well into that purpose. Psalm 6:5, “Among the dead no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the grave?” And our spiritual needs fit well. In Psalm 51, David asks God for forgiveness. Why? “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.” God gets glory when he meets our biological needs and our spiritual needs because of our thankful hearts, because we tell others about his provision, and because by meeting those needs he keeps us alive—both physically and spiritually—to image him.

Now, what relation do psychological needs have with our purpose as human beings? I think Ed Welch says this well.

“Other than forgiveness of sins, do we have any needs? Do we need relationships or not? The answer depends on what you mean by *need*. If we are talking about psychological needs, then no, we do not need relationships—with God or people—to fill our longings for significance and love. That would be like saying that I need God to meet my need to feel great and important. Self-serving needs are not meant to be satisfied; they are meant to be put to death.”

I don’t need other people in order to overcome some existential hole deep inside of me. Quoting Welch again, “The image of God in us is not about psychological need; it is about the abundance of gifts that God has given his people.” Which means that there *is* a sense that we need other people—not to fill up what is lacking, but to complete the purpose God made us for. When he made us in his image, he made *us*. Adam *and* Eve. Genesis 1:27 again, “in the image of God he created him; male and female he created *them*.” Imaging the triune God is not something that any of us can do by ourselves; God created humankind as community. In Genesis, we image God as family. This side of Jesus, we image him as family—and also as the family of God, the church.

“We were created as people with limited gifts and abilities. All the gifts of God are not contained in any one person. Therefore, we need other people in order to accomplish God’s purposes and most accurately reflect his unlimited glory.[[7]](#footnote-7)”

**Questions?**

**VII. Conclusion**

What do we really need?

So do we need privacy such that we fear people who can expose and humiliate us? No: that’s a fine thing to want, but that’s not a need. Because we know that God can use even our humiliation to make us holy and to further his ultimate purposes—just as his Son was exposed and humiliated for our sake. We can trust that even if he calls us to humiliation, it is for our ultimate good and his ultimate glory.

Do we need be feel included such that we fear people who can reject, ridicule, or despise us? No: those are find things to want, but those are not needs. Just as God allowed his Son to be rejected for our sakes, we know that he can use even rejection for our ultimate good and his ultimate glory.

And what about our safety? Clearly, God cares about that. Jesus said he feeds the birds and clothes the flowers—so will he not care for our needs in the same way? And yet even more than caring for our biological needs, he cares that we fill our created purpose. And in his care, he will sometimes let us experience harm. So we don’t need to fear it. It is the difference between the surgeons’ scalpel and the criminal’s knife. Every hurt that comes your way has been carefully measured, weighed out, and prescribed lovingly by the Great Physician whose delight is to make us holy. And in being made holy, we are made happy and he is seen as glorious.

Let’s close in prayer.

1. *When People Are Big and God is Small*, page 137 in the 1997 edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, page 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, page 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, page 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., page 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Welch, page 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)