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**Core Seminar**

**Fear of Man**

**Class 1: What Is the Fear of Man?**

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**OPEN WITH PRAYER**

**Introduction:**

[Open with your own story. Example:] I was terrified people would see me: all those eyes on me, waiting to see what I would say, how I would say it. Would I remember my lines, would I trip when I went up the stairs, what would all those faces look like from the front of the auditorium? The pressure mounted and it became too much, so I turned and decided to block them out. That’s right, in my first ever public speaking opportunity, it was my home church, a recital of some Scripture verses and a song. I was 4 years old, and instead of facing the audience I stood with my back to them looking straight into the baptistery.

1. **Where and how do we struggle with the fear of man?**

Fear of man is not limited to terror at the idea of [public speaking]. It extends to every facet of our lives, every level of interaction with other people. People we know, people we don’t know, people we don’t even really care to have a good opinion of us.

*We see it at Work:*
-How we respond to the aggressive, bully like person in the office. For me, I’m tempted to retreat, give into self-doubt, be distracted from my duties, even bitterness.

-Temptation to gossip in order to be with the “in-crowd”

-Leading a double life.

*We see it in dealing with conflict:*

In the way I often respond to conflict, I demonstrate my tendency to fear man more than God. I avoid difficult conversations, because I don’t want them not to like me. I’d rather enable someone’s sin against me than show them their fault. Why? Frankly, I think I’m more of a peace-lover than a peacemaker. I’d rather people like me even if it means papering over real problems.

*We see it in marriage*

On the one hand, your life is much more naturally exposed to another person, yet we find ourselves wanting to hide all the more. So, I cover up a purchase I made that my wife won’t like. Or I hide my over-booked scheduled. I’m tempted to keep certain sins hidden. For a lot of us, we fear that if anyone else knew what our spouse did, they’d have a very different opinion of us. Marriage can in fact be the place where we most give in to our fear of man. Or, more positively, one of God’s greatest tools for helping us see and overcome our fear of others.

*We see it at church.*

The church *can* be a place the Lord uses to grow us in fearing him more, fearing others less, and loving them more. But it can also be a place where fear of others can control us. You want to be viewed as mature or having it together, you think that others around you have it all together, so you don’t share your life honestly with them. When we allow our relationships in the church to be characterized by fear of others, we show that we don’t really understand who that other person is (a fellow sinner and brother/sister), we don’t understand who God is (Holy, Omniscient, Loving, Forgiving), and we don’t have an accurate picture of ourselves (desperately in need of mercy and grace).

In **different cultures fear of man is experienced in various ways**. We’re looking at this topic as Christians living in American culture. But we should be aware that other cultures may demonstrate fear of man in different ways. So, in some cultures, your relationship with your family or your ethnic group is a big deal. Then, fear of man and the experience of shame can take on more of a community orientation. On the West Coast what you drive and your recreational activities may define your sense of self-worth. While in a place like DC, your job and title and network may be more important.

My point is that this struggle can show up in many different ways, but at its core, it’s the same struggle. We fear man instead of fearing God. The world would have you try to address the symptoms; the Bible would have you address the core problem. And because this problem is so pervasive, so common, it can actually be hard to see. Thus the purpose for this class. We need to be aware of the water we swim in every day.

Ed Welch asks a number of questions to help us diagnose our fear of man in *When People Are Big and God Is Small[[1]](#footnote-1).* I’m going to read through them all and you’ll see them all on your handout. I want you to circle one or two that you want to think about over the next week.

* “Have you ever struggled with peer pressure?” What are the adult ways we experience peer pressure? The pursuit of the accomplished D.C. resume, the need for the perfect family, the house in the right neighborhood, the physical appearance. Maybe title or service in the church?
* “Are you over-committed? Do you find that it is hard to say no even when wisdom indicates that you should?”
* Do you “need” something from your spouse, coworker, your friend?
* “Do you ever feel as if you might be exposed as an imposter?”
* “Are you always second-guessing decisions because of what other people might think? Are you afraid of making mistakes that will make you look bad in other people’s eyes?”
* “Do you ever lie, especially the little white lies? What about cover-ups where you are not technically lying with your mouth?
* “Do you avoid people?”
* “Aren’t most diets, even when they are ostensibly under the heading of ‘health,’ dedicated to impressing others?” Or for that matter an obsession with physical fitness.
* “When you compare yourself with other people, do you feel good about yourself? Perhaps the most dangerous form of the fear of man is the ‘successful’ fear of man. Such people think they have made it. They feel good about themselves. But their lives are still defined by other people rather than God.” Consider the “religious leaders” in the Gospels.
* One more question, “have you ever been too timid to share your faith in Christ because others might think you are an irrational fool?”

**So here’s the big question in a room full of people-fearers: anyone want to share which question they circled and why?**

OK – on your handout, you’ll see a space for you to describe how fear of man manifests in your own life using your own words. Take a few minutes to write that down. You might use some of the language from this list, you might not. But I want you to consider some of the main ways you experience fear of man. Then through the rest of this class, I’d like you to have those words front and center in your mind as we talk about this.

[Give the class three minutes of silence to do this.]

As we go through the class, we’ll have three main categories of fear of man in our minds.

* First is fear of harm. That could be the bully down the street, the violent spouse, violence in your neighborhood, an angry person, sexual abuse and harassment, insults, persecution, racism…the list can keep on going. And as you can see most clearly in this first category, fear is not necessarily a bad thing. Fear can keep us safe. But we must always fear God first and foremost.
* Second is fear of rejection. And that’s often connected to fear that in comparison to others, we fall short. We compare based on social standing, career success, education, body type, perceived spiritual maturity, experiences—you get the picture. The fear of being rejected takes on different shapes depending on which side of these equations we find ourselves. If we’re lacking, we feel inadequate, worthless, inconsequential. If we’re not, we feel contempt, superior, we may condescendingly pity others.
* Third is fear of exposure. Fear of being revealed for who we really are. That in turn can show up in a variety of activities and attitudes. Obsession with various forms of fantasy, video games, books, or role playing. Escapism: drugs/alcohol, food/eating disorders, music/television—at the heart of many addictions you will find this type of fear of man. Perfectionism. Obsession with Work: the young person that comes to D.C. simply to “make a name” for himself, only to waste a lifetime hiding behind fading accomplishments. Hyper-masculinity and Feminism: We see a fear of exposure running through gender role confusions. Or even an American hyper-individuality and self-reliance. All centered on fear of exposure, fear that deep inside we’re not good enough.

Fear of harm, fear of rejection, fear of exposure. That’s where we’re headed the next few weeks. So what’s our plan to address all that?

For the rest of today’s class, we’ll ask some basic orientation questions. Who fears man? Why? What does the Bible say about the fear of man? What fruit does it bear? And what is the Bible’s answer? Then next week, if you look at the outline on the back of your handout, we’ll switch to the positive, looking at the fear of God. The week after, we’ll study how fear of man shows up in the three categories I just mentioned. Class 4 will examine what we really need in life—since a wrong estimation of our needs is behind a lot of fear of man. Class 5 will examine the Bible’s answer to the world’s quest for self esteem. Class six will look at the transition we all need to make from fearing and needing to loving and serving. And finally in class seven we’ll get some fear of man experts in and ask them some questions.

***Any questions so far?***

**Who fears man?**

I Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.…” So, who struggles with the fear of man? Fear of man is very much a “common to man” temptation. As we will see a little later, some of the strongest figures in Scripture were plagued by this struggle. Fear of man is a universal struggle, it is not limited to position, social standing, or personality type. So who struggles?

-The apparently strong

-The weak

-The rich and influential

-The poor

-The timid

-The bold

-The believer

-The unbeliever

One of Satan’s first lines of attack is to convince you that you are the only one struggling this way. Or that no one else struggles like you do.

But that’s part of why we’re a church! We know each other. And as we get to know each other better, we see how much we share in our sin and our struggle. We see how much we share in our hope in Christ. Shared sin leads to shared hope.

That raises an important question, then. What is it about being human in a fallen world that seems almost universally to lead to fear of man? Why do we struggle with fear of man? That’s point #3 on your handout.

**2. Why do we fear man?**

I suppose there are as many answers to that question as there are people. But let me give you some big categories that you might find in your own life.

1. **Past experience** tells us that people can cause us harm and pain and difficulties. Life hurts, we *will* be rejected, and we *will* be exposed.

2. We are proud and self-centered. **Pride** is at the heart of our fear of man. Because pride isn’t limited to the self-confident. It’s also at the center insecurity and codependency. Whichever end it’s on, pride bases self-worth on how you compare to others, which is ripe terrain for fear of man.

3. We have a **needs based view of other people**. I need her love, I need his respect, I need my children’s obedience, I need his friendship. I need a certain kind of church, I need these clothes, I need this type of education, I need meaningful work, I need an understanding boss.

4. A wrong view of what we **deserve**. Once we beginning to get careless with the word *need,* it’s a short step toward using the word *deserve*. While all the things that I just mentioned are good things, is it true that I “need” those things? I may want those things. There may be great advantage to having those things. But as a Christian I must ultimately say that no, I don’t need these things. But not in a Buddhist sense of denying needs or desires. The Christian sense of saying that all I need is met in Christ. For one, my sins are atoned for and I am reconciled to God. But beyond that, he has promised to provide in every way that is best for me.

Ed Welch says, “When psychological needs, rather than sin, are seen as our primary problem, not only is our self-understanding affected, but the gospel itself is changed. A needs theory suggests that the gospel is, most deeply, intended to meet psychological needs. In other words, the gospel is aimed at our self-esteem problem. It is aimed at our tendency to dwell on our failures. It is intended to be a statement of God’s love saying that ‘God doesn’t make junk.’ This sounds good to us, but it is not the gospel. The good news of Jesus is not intended to make us feel good about *ourselves*. Instead, the good news humbles us.” It tells us that we are not the point and that is wonderful and joyous news.

As we begin to reexamine what we truly need and deserve, remember the one who endured pain, rejection, and exposure to shame. Dealing with fear of man apart from Christ’s work on the cross may provide some temporary relief. But it will never get to the heart of the solution we so desperately need: a changed heart.

**Question: What has contributed to your own struggle with fear of man?**

**3. What does Scripture say about the fear of man?**

***What does Scripture say about the fear of man?***

If we are to better understand the fear of man, we must turn to Scripture. What does Scripture say about fearing others?

* The fear of man originated at the Fall. Genesis 3:6-7, “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.”
* The fear of man is shortsighted. Luke 12:4-5, “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”
* It is a destructive trap. Proverbs 29:25, “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.”
* It is the opposite of love. I John 4:18, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”
* It minimizes the nature of our position in Christ. Romans 8:35, 38-39, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And, of course, Scripture is full of not just teaching about the fear of man, but examples as well. Just a few that come to mind:

* Abraham (Genesis 12:10-13) still called Abram, feared that Pharaoh would kill him because of his wife’s beauty. So he told a half-truth (a whole lie). Abraham was the father of a nation that would struggle with the fear of man. It’s wrong to think that giving into the fear of man will only affect ourselves.
* Lot (Genesis 19) demonstrates that fearing man more than God has ramifications far beyond our own lives. Notice Lot, particularly his fear of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and the bitter fruit that bore in the lives of his family.
* Jacob (Genesis 27:41-44) flees to Laban because of fear that Esau will kill him.
* Moses (Exodus 2:11-17; Numbers 20:9-13) as a young man flees after killing a man, fearing punishment and death. Later in his life as the leader of Israel, he strikes the rock. His anger with the people caused him to fear them more than to trust and fear God.
* Aaron (Exodus 32:22-24) gives in to the Israelites’ demands to fashion idols of gold and then defends his motives and actions before Moses.
* Samson (Judges 14:14-17, 16:4-20) gives in to his nagging wife, and later in his response to Delilah, his fear of man was met with an immediate and tragic result.
* Saul (I Samuel 18) responds in jealous anger to David’s rise.
* Jonah (Jonah 4:1-4) is outraged by God’s compassion upon Ninevah; his fear of man was manifest in hatred towards the Ninevites.
* The Pharisees (many examples throughout the Gospels) feared both the response and opinions of other people. They looked down on people they felt weren’t as good as them.
* Peter (Luke 22:54-62) denies Christ. Later, (Galatians 2:11-21) Paul confronts Peter for not standing up to the Judaizers. He endorsed legalistic behavior because he feared their opinion, and so he confused the gospel.

What do many of these examples have in common? The Lord used weak vessels to accomplish his purposes.

So what fruit does the fear of man bear in our lives? Let me summarize in four basic categories:

1. Discontent—if my hope and trust is being placed in the opinions of other people, I will never be truly satisfied—just like Lot.
2. Unhealthy dependency upon others—my orientation towards others is not correct; therefore, I will need them in an unhealthy manner—just like Samson.
3. Cynicism—if I value the opinions of other people more than the opinion of the Lord, I will grow cynical as I see that other people cannot bear the weight of my expectations—just like the Pharisees.
4. Bitterness—discontent and cynicism will lead to bitterness the deeper fear of man runs its course in my life—just like Jonah.
5. Lost opportunity—when we spend our time trying to avoid rejection or the exposure of failure, we lose the opportunity and blessing that comes through obedience—just like Saul.
6. Disunity-when we wrongly fear others, it leads to break down and harm in relationships. Disunity in marriage, at work, at church—just like happened with Peter.

We get so used to living with the fear of man, I think we often underestimate how severe an effect it has on us. But Scripture says quite clearly, you cannot fear both God and man. When we fear man more than God, the impact is devastating.

**Question: What are some ways where you’ve seen bad fruit from the fear of man in your life?**

***4. Before we close, let me make one clarification that’s important:*** Is there such a thing as legitimate fear of man versus sinful fear of man, and if so how do we distinguish between the two?

The short answer is yes. As I mentioned earlier in the class, I don’t mean to give the impression that there is not a right and appropriate way in which we can fear others. It’s right to fear others in the sense that we afford them proper respect. It’s right to feel a sense of fear when we encounter physically dangerous situations. It’s not wrong or sinful to desire that others would approve of and accept us. It’s not wrong to desire some level of privacy.

But fear of others begins to become sinful when it governs our lives. When we cross the line from enjoying the approval of others to believing that we need or deserve it. When, for example, we’re so gripped by fear of being physically hurt that we’re unwilling to risk physical pain in order to serve God. The Christian life is not one that needlessly pursues pain, suffering, rejection, exposure and abuse. But neither is it a religion that understands these things to be ultimate. If you’re struggling to know whether you have a right or wrong fear of man, think back to the questions we asked at the beginning. And for more detail, I’d refer you back to Ed Welch’s book, chapter 1.

**Are there any questions?**

**5. The Gospel meets our Fear**

We cannot stop fearing man on our own. There is One who did not give into the fear of man but gave Himself up. So that we could fear God rightly and be freed from the fear of man.

Earlier we heard from Romans 8 “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” In Romans 5:5-11 Paul gives us more details of Christ’s love for us:

***5b God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.
6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person-though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die-
8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.
10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.
11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. - Romans 5:5-11***

If you are trusting in Christ alone for your salvation. Consider these truths. You cannot be condemned by the rejection of another person. The love and acceptance and covering you needed most, was provided for you at just the right time while you were still powerless in your sins!

Without Christ, apart from relationship with God, we can only live in horizontal comparison. But you are free from the law of sin and death. Christ has paid the price of your sin and absorbed your condemnation in Himself.

The greatest rejection you could ever face, the wrath of God Himself, was received by Jesus Christ. The greatest shame and exposure you could imagine was already experienced by Jesus.

What should that do in us? It should free us. It should free us not simply from fear of rejection, shame and eternal harm. It frees us to now Fear and Love God with all our hearts and love our neighbors and enemies as ourselves. Gospel freedom isn’t simply freedom from condemnation. It’s freedom *to* relationship, freedom *to* a life focused not on our own covering and protection and escape but towards loving others. Just as Christ has so loved us.

Next week, we will begin unpacking what the fear of God looks like. **Close with Prayer**.

**Close with Prayer**

1. Pages 14-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)