

Now Why this Fear?

April 14th, 2013

Luke 12:1-12

"⁴I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ⁵But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! ⁶Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. ⁷Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows."

We've just sung a song called, "Now why this Fear?", and it's a fitting question as we examine this passage. The central issue that Jesus is dealing with here is the subject of fear, particularly the fear of other people (or as Proverbs 29:25 calls it, "the fear of man"; that is, craving the approval of other people, or fearing their disapproval or rejection). We call this many things today: with teenagers, we tend to use the phrase "peer-pressure", as we get older we call it "people-pleasing". Psychologists call it "co-dependency". But the Word of God calls it fear of man, and Jesus teaches that it's deadly.

Dealing with it is crucial to living as Jesus' disciple. Remember, that is what Luke is concerned with showing us in these chapters in Luke. For eight chapters, Luke mainly focused on answering the question, "Who is Jesus?" Midway through chapter 9, Jesus asked that question of His disciples, and after they answered correctly, Jesus began to teach them more specifically what it means to follow Him as Lord and Christ.

That's what Jesus is doing with His disciples here. He is saying that fundamentally, if they are going to be His disciples, walking in His ways and carrying out His mission, they are going to need to kill this fear. As Paul would say years later, "¹⁰If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ." You can't do both! To be a disciple of Jesus means to live in the fear of God, not of other people.

Without using the phrase "fear of man" in this text, Jesus shows us two common ways that fear of man exposes itself, and He points us to a fear

that calms those other fears. I hope by the time we're done this morning, you'll have an answer to this question, "Now why this fear?", and you'll better prepared to wage war on it in the power of the Spirit.

Two Manifestations of the Fear of Man

1. Pretending to be what you are not

So first, let's listen to Jesus as He draws our attention to a couple of symptoms of this problem of fearing others (and how poisonous this ailment is to the soul). As the chapter begins, remember that Jesus has been dining in the home of a Pharisee and has gone on a lengthy tirade exposing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of His day. Now Luke tells us that thousands were gathering around Jesus, the buzz about Him was reaching a peak, and Jesus begins to warn His disciples of the condition He's just condemned in the Pharisees and lawyers: "¹Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."

As Jesus prepared His disciples to carry on the mission of spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth, He knew that more and more people would look to them, and that this would produce a greater pressure on them to pretend. That's what the word "hypocrisy" means; it was used in that day of those who were actors in the theater. To be a hypocrite is to put on a mask and to pretend to be something that you are not; to create a public impression that is at odds with the real you.

The driving motive behind this is that we want to be seen in a positive light by others. Since the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden, there is an inclination in the human heart to crave human approval, we define ourselves by what others think of us, feeling good about ourselves when we have it and miserable when we don't. That is how the Pharisees did their acts of piety (see Matthew 6), and so Jesus called them hypocrites.

Can you see this instinct in your own soul? Fishing for compliments, or maybe saying something derogatory about yourself in hopes that someone will “correct” you? “Little white lies” to put yourself in a more flattering light? An excessive concern with how you look, lots of time spent in front of the mirror? Feeling unappreciated? Devastated and defensive when someone speaks a word of correction to you, or terrified of speaking a hard word to someone else? Easily embarrassed? Second-guessing your decisions because of what others might think? Unable to say no to people, even when wisdom dictates that you should? These are symptoms of people having an enslaving power over you, and it will cause you to put on a mask, and be a hypocrite.

And Jesus warns His disciples that this sort of acting is an exercise in futility: “²Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ³Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.” Why hide now, when it's all going to come out and be exposed one day anyway? We're often pretty driven by the desire for confidentiality, we say we're “private people”, but God's Word on confidentiality is: “¹³No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (cf. Romans 2:16, Ecclesiastes 12:14).

So beware, Jesus says, of this impulse to hide and to act and to pretend. It's destructive!

2. Pretending not to be what you are

There is a second manifestation of the fear of man that Jesus exposes in this text, in some ways it's the flip side of the first manifestation.

Whereas verses 1-3 deal with a person who pretends to be what he is not, verses 8-12 deal with the case of a person who is pretending not to be what he is: “⁸And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before

men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, ⁹but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God."

The context here is one of persecution (v.4, 11). Jesus knows that as He sends these twelve out to change the world, they are going to suffer. Faithful disciples are going to experience opposition because of their allegiance to Jesus as King (2 Timothy 3:12). That opposition is still prevalent today. For us, it might mean being killed, or being brought before the authorities (at least, not yet), but it will come. And when the approval of other people is a ruling desire in your heart, it will cause you to deny Jesus for the sake of looking good before others. I've called this chameleon Christianity.

But Jesus says, it's no Christianity at all. If you're unwilling to take a stand for Him, He will be unwilling to take a stand for you before the angels, in the heavenly courtroom. Immediately Jesus clarifies His teaching: "¹⁰And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven (*Peter is a vivid example, and his transformation is evident in Acts 4, where we see verses 11-12 fulfilled in him*), but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven."

A detailed explanation of blasphemy against the Spirit is beyond the scope of this message, but the accounts in Mark and Matthew link this teaching with Luke 11:15, where the Pharisees confront Jesus and they basically declare, "Jesus, you have a lot of power and authority. You do miracles and cast out demons, but you do it by the power of Satan." Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is resisting all of the work of the Holy Spirit and ultimately rejecting the person of Jesus. It is a habitual, willful, settled, malicious, hateful rejection of the Spirit-illuminated truth of Jesus. If you're fearful of having committed it, you've not reached that level of hardness. But beware nevertheless!

Who has More Glory?

Qualifications aside, I hope these verses show how deadly and destructive the fear of man can be. Now, what do we do about it? A good physician does not just correctly diagnose the problem, but he prescribes the proper treatment for the condition. And Jesus is a great Physician! In verses 4-7, Jesus puts His finger on the antidote to the fear of man:

"⁴I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ⁵But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!"

The answer to the fear of man is the fear of God. When He becomes more glorious in our hearts than the people whose approval we crave, or whose rejection we fear, then we'll stop fearing others. Whoever you deem most glorious, you will fear. And whoever you fear most, you'll most desire that person's pleasure and approval. I want you to see this glory-connection for yourselves, rather than rely on me or Tim Chester to see it. In John 12, we see some people who were impressed with the works of Jesus, but not impressed enough to stop their pursuit of the approval of man:

"Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God." (John 12:42-43)

Understand this about fear: fear is a response of the soul that arises when the object of your hope -- the thing that you love and treasure and value, the thing that we ascribe the greatest glory to (glory = weight) -- is being threatened. Do you see the connection in John 12 between fear and glory? The people had some measure of belief in Jesus, but they were afraid to acknowledge Him (Luke 12:9), and John explicitly tells us that the reason they were afraid ("For...", v.43) is because the esteem and praise of man was more glorious than the esteem and praise of

God. Underneath our hiding and hypocrisy, and our denials of Jesus, and all the other symptoms of fear of man, is a glory exchange.

The Fear of God

So the answer is not willpower, moral effort: "Stop hiding, be authentic! Stop being afraid to talk about Me, be bold and courageous!" No, the answer is the fear of God. The fear of man is stupid because, really, in the end, what can man do to you? Think less of you? Speak negatively about you? Kill you? What is that in light of One who has authority to cast into hell? Clearly hell is a fate worse than death. Jesus speaks of it as outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. He calls it a fiery furnace, the unquenchable fire, eternal fire. He says in this chapter that when He comes a second time, He will cut into pieces those who are not prepared for Him.

So, Jesus says, drain from your heart the fear of man by seeing God as a holy, righteous, omnipotent Judge. But this seems troubling, doesn't it? It gives the impression that following Jesus means leading a life of anxious fear that God is angry with us and ready to punish us with unimaginable torment at the slightest misstep.

But that is not what Jesus wants for us. That is not the way He means for us to experience the liberating fear of God. We know that because immediately after His warning He says something that is clearly designed to give us deep peace and sweet confidence in His tender, loving, Fatherly care:

"⁶Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. ⁷Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows."

Sweet, Liberating Fear

What a beautiful mystery this Man is! In the same breath He says, "Fear God who casts into hell," and "Do not fear because God values you more than the sparrows and knows your smallest need." How do we reconcile these two realities? I think that the way we do it is by understanding that we were created to be safely afraid of God. That may seem strange, but there are experiences in life that bear witness to this. There is a reason why people run away in horror from a shark in the ocean, yet the movie Jaws grossed almost half a billion dollars at the box office when it was released. And there is a reason why falling out of an airplane would be terrifying, yet provides a thrill when a parachute is attached to you.

They point to the fact that there is a sweetness and a delight to fearing something awesome and powerful and destructive, when the real prospect of danger to you has been removed. It's the difference between being in a Tsunami and watching it on TV. Fearing God is a delight -- not a terror -- when the real prospect of hell and judgment and condemnation are removed from you. When the condemnation of God is removed from the dread of God and when we are deeply assured that He is now Father and Friend, what's left is a humble, trembling, joyful, liberating, sweet and safe fear of God.

In His first advent, that is what Jesus came to do. You see, even the severe words of verses 4-5 are addressed to His "friends". And what does Jesus tell us elsewhere about how it is possible for us to be His friends? "¹³Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Real fear of God can coexist with sweet peace and trust in Him because in Christ, God has graciously removed His wrath and condemnation from all who would receive Him by faith. Our peace doesn't come from removing the God of wrath from our thinking, but from His removing wrath from us.

Though you are naked and laid bare before His eyes -- He has inspected every hidden flaw and sin that you've tried so hard to cover from others -- through union with Jesus this God delights in you with the very intensity and joy with which He delights in Jesus Himself (John 17:23). In Christ, you are both known to the depths and loved to the heights! Even death cannot harm you now, but has become your servant, and is a doorway into the arms of your Savior, Lord and Friend who loved you unto death!

Can you imagine what rich resources are yours for life and godliness and freedom from the enslaving fear of other people when you embrace that this God knows you to the depths, governs the even the smallest details of your life, and is *for you*? There's no reason to pretend, no reason to hide, no reason to fear. May the truth that God is glorious set you free from the tyranny of fearing others, so you can serve Jesus faithfully as His disciple and dearly loved friend.