

THE FEAR OF THE LORD PART II: FEAR THAT DISPLEASES GOD

Isaiah 29:13-16a; John 16:24-27

Isaiah 29:13-16a (NIV): "The Lord says: 'These people come near to me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. Their worship [fear] of Me is based on merely human rules they have been taught. ¹⁴ Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.' ¹⁵ Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, 'Who sees us? Who will know?' ¹⁶ You turn things upside down."

John 16:24-27 (NASB): "'Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full. ²⁵ These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father. ²⁶ In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father.'"

INTRODUCTION

In the days of knights, kings, and castles, a Viking army invaded a Christian kingdom to pillage the blessings of God's prosperity and to murder all who would not renounce Christ for the Viking gods. The King's Son, with a red cross emblazoned across his chest, led the army to engage the pagan hordes and won battle after battle against them. But the campaign against these persistent foes grew prolonged. The King's troops grew sorely in need of fresh arms and supplies. The King's Son dispatched a soldier to carry this urgent message for aid to his Father the King. After two days of forced riding, this weary soldier arrived at the castle late at night. His battle dress was torn and soiled, so he checked into an inn. He thought that after a hot meal, good night's sleep, bath, and clean clothes, he would be more presentable for an audience with his majesty the King. He drank too much wine, however, got into a drunken brawl, and was thrown into jail for the night. He awoke sober the next morning and felt shame over his actions. When released, he thought he must devote himself to a week of prayer, attendance at chapel, and good deeds to atone for his misdeeds, before he would be worthy to enter the King's presence. His army then began to suffer tragic defeats from running low on provisions. When this soldier finally presented himself to the King, do you think the King commended him for waiting to make himself presentable and to atone for his misdeeds before delivering the message from the King's Son? If not, what do you think the King said to him? Would it have been something like, "You fool! Didn't you realize that when you came to me with a message from my Son, I could care less about your personal worthiness or unworthiness? All that you needed for an audience with me and my approval was to say, 'I come to you in the name of your Son!'"

Last week, we began a series of messages on "The Fear of the Lord." We focused upon **Proverbs 9:10**, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." Do you think many in our country today might feel threatened by someone speaking of "fearing the Lord"? A few years ago, Jerry Stevens, a skywriter pilot of Boca Raton Florida, greeted the New Year by writing, "God is Great," "God is Awesome," and similar messages in the sky above the city. He wanted to give his townspeople a message of hope; an assurance of God's strong, protective care if they would put their trust in Him. But many people panicked when they saw the skywriting and called the police. They believed it was a terrorists' plot, along the lines of Muslim radicals who shout "Allahu Akbar" (Allah is the greatest) while committing murder and destruction. One commentator said, "This tells a lot about our nation: We have little fear of God today but we are terrified of the terrorists."

Even Christians have varied thoughts about what "fear of the Lord" means. The same Hebrew word for "fear" in **Proverbs 9:10** is used when people are in "terror" for their lives, and also to express "awe" or "respect." In 1891, midway through the Presidency of Benjamin Harrison, the White House was wired for

newfangled electricity. President Harrison and his wife, Caroline, were so fearful of the possibility of being shocked or electrocuted that they didn't dare touch the switches themselves. If there were no servants around to turn off the lights when the Harrisons went to bed, they slept with them on. Did they show "awe," "respect," or "terror" toward the presence of electricity in the White House, or a mixture of all three?

Last Sunday, we learned the first way to apply what it means to "fear the LORD" is this: (1) We honor God as our Creator-Lord by making serving and pleasing Him our #1 Priority in life. As **Deuteronomy 13:4** (NASB) urges, "'You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him.'"

A second way to apply what it means to "fear the Lord" is: (2) We trust Him to be our moral guide through life, meaning we want to view ourselves and the world around us through His eyes and by His values. **Proverbs 3:5** serves as a signpost to warn us not assume our own thoughts and desires of how to live are probably right: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding." The family of a woman in her 80s urged her to stop driving alone at night. Concerned for her safety, they told her of the rising number of muggings, carjackings, and even kidnappings in their town. But she enjoyed the leisure of nighttime shopping. Instead of not driving at night she decided to buy a handgun; a .38 special. She didn't know a thing about handling a gun, but she loaded it and shoved it in her purse. She decides she'll use it if anyone gives her trouble. A few months later, she walks out of a store just as three men are seen slamming the door closed on her car. She thinks, "This is my moment. I'll show everyone I can take care of myself." She reaches into her purse, pulls out her gun, walks up to the car window, and says, "Get out of my car! Get away from behind that steering wheel! You guys move!" The three guys got out and ran away in three different directions. By now, a crowd has gathered. They are staring at her and smiling. She's feeling pretty good about herself as she puts the gun in her purse and takes out her keys. She then discovers her keys don't fit the lock. This is not her car! **Proverbs 14:12** (NLT) chillingly warns, "There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death." Well, not this time, but almost.

For all the problems we bring upon ourselves when we fail to "fear the Lord" by not making serving and pleasing Him our #1 Priority in life, and by leaning upon our own understanding of what's right and wrong instead of trusting fully in God's wisdom, there are also wrong ways to fear the Lord that actually displease Him rather than please Him. Today, we will consider The Fear that Purchases God's Favor

THE FEAR THAT PURCHASES GOD'S FAVOR

There are three main reasons why we may attempt to purchase God's favor: ignorance, insecurity, and insincerity. Even Christians who truly love God may fall into the trap of attempting to purchase His favor through *ignorance* of the full implications of **Jesus'** words in **John 16:24-27** (NASB): "'Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full. ²⁵ These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father. ²⁶ In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father.'"

In Biblical days, travel and communication were difficult; people were often sent in another's "name." A merchant in Jerusalem might send a servant to a merchant in Alexandria, Egypt, the Roman Empire's leading commercial center. For purposes of their business, the Alexandrian merchant was under obligation to receive and treat the servant just as though his master *had come himself*. The servant might arrive in tatters from the long journey, be ill-spoken, illiterate, or smell badly. He could be a recovered alcoholic, a former embezzler, or an ex-convict. He could have a quick temper and be seen kicking his camel. Would he still receive the respect, courtesy, food, and accommodations the master himself would expect? Yes! Otherwise, the master would be greatly offended. Why? Because this servant had come "in his name."

If you've had a good couple of weeks resisting temptation, helping others, and enjoying a close walk with Christ, would this make you more confident to go into God's presence and have your prayers answered for a critical need, than if you'd just repented of a sin that shamed you deeply? You shouldn't. This means you think God's going to receive you and answer your prayers because of your current "good" standing with God. **Isaiah 64:6** (NLT) reminds us, "We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall, and our sins sweep us away like the wind." If you've sinned greatly, such as the "sharp disagreement" causing Paul and Barnabas to have a falling out (**Acts 15:36-40**), or Peter three times denying even knowing **Jesus** (**Luke 22:54-62**), and you've fully repented of your sin, do you still feel unworthy of asking God to meet a critical need in your life? You shouldn't. If we have unrepentant sin in our lives, we *do* have no business expecting God to answer our prayers. **Psalms 66:18** (NLT) makes this clear: "If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." But, can you say **I John 1:9** (NKJV) with me, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This means the blood of **Jesus** makes us appear as clean to God the Father as if we had never sinned. There's nothing else we need do to make us acceptable to God, to purchase His favor, than to come to Him in **Jesus'** name on the basis of the value of His shed blood for us. Nothing!

A second reason we mistakenly attempt to purchase God's favor is *insecurity*. Is human love mostly unconditional or conditional? People generally love us because of how we benefit them or measure up to their expectations. Very few will ever love us just as we are, accepting both the good and the bad about us. When we think how thoroughly God knows us, including our worst thoughts and feelings, it's difficult to grasp God nevertheless loves us unconditionally; flaws and all. Without consciously being aware we are doing so, it's easy to fall into the trap of believing we must perform for God, to measure up to His expectations, so that He will not cool in His love for us or deny us what we ask of Him in prayer.

I don't know if insecurity played a part in your life; it played a major role in mine. It probably started when separated from my family for four years, ages 1-5, while hospitalized with tuberculosis. Then, when released from the hospital, I didn't just come into a home as the youngest of three children; I was brother to a sister who was always among the most popular students of her class, and a brother both popular and one of the best athletes of his class. Somehow, I came to feel I needed to compete for my parents' attention. I think I was afraid I might be sent away again if I didn't measure up. This insecurity spilled over into my relationship with my Heavenly Father after I became a Christian at 18. I relished the affection He showed upon me, but I kept thinking, "He cannot continue to give me this much attention. He will soon set me aside for someone who pleases Him more." Thus, for eight years, I drove myself to extra acts of devotion and deeds of service, so that my Heavenly Father would not cool in His love for me or not allow me to be as close to Him as I'd come to enjoy. When I met another Christian who seemed more devoted to the Lord, it would cast me into depression because I would think, "Oh, oh. God will now shift His special attention to him, or to her." How wonderful was the day when it dawned upon me our Heavenly Father loves each of us unconditionally and with the special affection shown toward "friends" of His Son." As **Romans 5:10-11** (NLT) declares, "For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of His Son while we were still His enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of His Son. ¹¹ So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God."

A third reason why we may mistakenly attempt to purchase God's favor is *insincerity*. We may not seek to draw closer to Him because we delight in Him; we want to draw Him closer so that He will delight in us. We may not seek to be on God's side by approving what He says to do; we may want God to be on our side to approve what we want to do. We may not seek to serve God's interests by furthering the moral and spiritual values of Christ's Kingdom in others; we may want God to serve our interests by furthering the goals of our own personal kingdom. Thus, our "fear of God" may be limited to going through the motions of actions that make us appear to be God-serving when we are truly little more than self-serving. We may

deceive others or even ourselves of our sincerity in fearing God, but **Isaiah 29:13-16a** (GNT) describes God's disgust with such insincerity and the judgment it deserves: "The Lord said, "These people claim to worship Me, but their words are meaningless, and their hearts are somewhere else. Their religion is nothing but human rules and traditions, which they have simply memorized. ¹⁴ So I will startle them with one unexpected blow after another. Those who are wise will turn out to be fools, and all their cleverness will be useless.' Those who try to hide their plans from the LORD are doomed! They carry out their schemes in secret and think no one will see them or know what they are doing. ¹⁶ They turn everything upside down."

Of course, we may sincerely fear the Lord with a mixture of "terror," "awe," and "respect," and yet still feel at a loss over how this means we should act in some situations. The late comedian Ronnie Shakes once quipped, "I fear one day I'll meet God, He'll sneeze, and I won't know what to say."

CONCLUSION

Jeanette Renick is an R. N. who lives in Mesa, AZ. Recently, she came on duty at her hospital and got the report on a patient named Ted, a man in his 50s, who'd been admitted as an assault victim through the ER. His true story portrays the surrender of our hearts in full devotion to **Jesus**, and the awe-filled submission to Christ's values, which dramatically testify we are among those who live in "the fear of the Lord."

Ted had received multiple blood transfusions, survived surgery for his ruptured spleen, and was HIV positive. Jeanette's heart was burdened for his spiritual condition. On her initial rounds, she scanned his room for any clues of his beliefs and was relieved to see several Christian greeting cards and a Bible. Later that morning, she asked him, "Are you a Christian?" His face beamed as he said, "Yes! I became a Christian since coming to the hospital!" Ted then told Jeanette his father and sister were faithful Christians who'd prayed for him and tried to share Christ with him, but he'd steadfastly insisted he wanted nothing to do with Christianity. Ted had been "married" for many years to an extremely controlling and abusive man. Fear for his life is all that kept Ted from leaving. A male cousin of Ted's abuser recently moved in temporarily with them. He treated Ted with such kindness that Ted was drawn into an "affair" with him; unaware the cousin was HIV positive. Ted contracted HIV from him. When his partner learned of Ted's unfaithfulness and that he'd contracted HIV, he brutally beat Ted and left him for dead. In severe pain and weak from internal bleeding, he could barely crawl from the bedroom to the bathroom. Finally, on the 3rd day, extremely weak and near death from blood loss, Ted made a desperate call to his father, who promptly called an ambulance. While receiving transfusions in the ER, a Dr. explained he required immediate surgery to remove his spleen or he would die. Ted consented, then lost consciousness.

Either in a vision or a near-death experience, Ted found himself in darkness surrounded by grotesque, demonic beings clawing and grasping for him. He was in his bed with his beloved dog at his side trying to protect him. He could feel himself sinking, being pulled downward. Suddenly, a huge snake among these demonic beings lunged for his dog, seeking to swallow her. Totally helpless and extremely terrified, Ted cried out, "Jesus! Save me!" Immediately, the terror and darkness vanished and he was enveloped in light and peace. **Jesus** had saved him! In no position to argue, Ted had embraced Christ as His Master.

When Ted regained consciousness, he learned his surgery had been successfully completed. Physically, he had a new chance for life. Spiritually, Ted realized he'd also been reborn as a new man who deeply loved his Lord and Savior. Ted accepted without question that pleasing and serving his Lord should be his #1 priority in life. He also accepted without question the Bible he now avidly read is God's owner's manual whose instructions for how he should live, including God's design of heterosexuality, should be followed wholeheartedly. Before he left the hospital that day to live with his father, who would nurture Ted's physical and spiritual health, Jeanette prayed for God's protection and blessings over him, fully confident she would see Ted again in Heaven! "You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him" (**Deuteronomy 13:4**, NASB).