

## "FEAR THAT PLEASES OR DISPLEASES THE LORD?"-PART III

### Mark 7:1-8

(NIV) "The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus<sup>2</sup> and saw some of His disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.<sup>3</sup> (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.<sup>4</sup> When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)<sup>5</sup> So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, 'Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?'<sup>6</sup> He replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "'These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me.<sup>7</sup> They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules'" [Isaiah 29:13].<sup>8</sup> You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.'"

### INTRODUCTION

Sulawesi is a large island located in central Indonesia. Prior to the spread of the Christian faith among the Toraja people, one of the island's ethnic groups, the road to marriage for women was paved with broken teeth. Ancient religious beliefs dictated this practice as a sign of submission to their pagan god and to their husbands. Thus, for thousands of years, only girls without their front teeth could succeed in kindling the flames of love in the hearts of the Toraja men by their smiles. Such girls came to be thought of as prettier to the Toraja men, who were assured their wives would not bite them. A marriageable Toraja girl would traditionally grab the first handy stone and knock out her front teeth, to signal her readiness to be a proper wife to her husband. This custom persisted in remote areas of this island until late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For the past two weeks, we've explored the theme, "Fear That Pleases or Displeases the Lord." We've focused upon "the fear of the LORD" with which God wants to capture our hearts. As Solomon proclaimed 3,000 years ago, such "fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom": the starting point of safely navigating through the moral complexities of life (**Proverbs 9:10**). Under the first Outline Point, Necessary Fear, we learned that Biblical, God-honoring "fear of the LORD" consists of three factors: Awe of God's Power, Reverence for God's Person, and a Passion for God's Pleasure (meaning it hurts us to fall short of pleasing our Lord). Such "fear of the LORD" will give God's will and God's guidance the priority in all that we do.

Does this mean we should live in dread of the Lord as a lightning-hurling, fire-breathing tyrant who threatens us if we do not subject ourselves to abusive demands, like having our front teeth knocked out? No! We have every assurance our Biblical LORD God is indeed a good God! **Psalms 145:9**: "The LORD is good to everyone; His compassion rests on all He has made." **Psalms 100:5** (NIV): "For the LORD is good and His love endures forever; His faithfulness continues through all generations." But should we presume upon God's goodness by feeling comfortable in His presence even if we cling to wrong actions and attitudes that defy or disgust Him? Not if we take seriously God's warnings to us in **Hebrews 10:28-31** (GNT): "Anyone who disobeys the Law of Moses is put to death without any mercy when judged guilty from the evidence of two or more witnesses.<sup>29</sup> What, then, of those who despise the Son of God? who treat as a cheap thing the blood of God's covenant which purified them from sin? who insult the Spirit of grace? Just think how much worse<sup>30</sup> is the punishment they will deserve! <sup>30</sup>For we know who said, 'I will take revenge, I will repay'; and who also said, 'The LORD will judge His people.'<sup>31</sup> It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God!" We can have every assurance of our LORD's love for us and goodness toward us, but if we lose sight of the LORD as a God of terrifying majesty, the God we claim to worship is a poor imitation of the "great and awesome God" of Scripture (**Deuteronomy 7:21**).

The story is told of a zoo famous for its collection of a great variety of animals. One day the gorilla died. To keep up appearances of a full range of animals, the zoo owner hired a man to wear a gorilla suit to

fill in for the dead animal until a replacement gorilla could be found. On his first day, this man didn't know how to act much like a real gorilla. He tried to climb and move about more convincingly, got too close to the enclosure wall, lost his balance, and fell into the lion exhibit. He began to scream; convinced his life was over. He screamed louder when the lion walked closer. Then he heard the lion say: "Be quiet, you fool, or you're going to get us both fired!" If we've allowed our ideas of "god" to become a poor substitute for the God of the Bible, we should fire him! For our own good, our hearts should be captured by Awe of God's Power, Reverence for God's Person, and a Passion for God's Pleasure. We will then be blessed by "The fear of the LORD [that] is the beginning of wisdom": the starting point of safely navigating through the moral complexities of life (**Proverbs 9:10**).

But our "great and awesome God" wants to free us from false ideas of "fearing Him" that displease Him. Today's focus is upon "fears of the LORD" that are not only needless but unworthy of Him. Previously, we discussed two such needless fears: Fear that Seeks to Purchase God's Favor and Fear of God's Purpose. We identified three reasons why we may fall into the trap of seeking to Purchase God's Favor: *ignorance* of what it means to pray "in Jesus' name." We mistakenly believe our access to God is based upon our personal worthiness or unworthiness at any given moment. But we enjoy eternal access to our Heavenly Father's presence by the blood of **Jesus** that cleanses us from sin so completely that God deals with us as if we had never sinned! Secondly, we fall into the trap of seeking to Purchase God's Favor from *insecurity* over our relationship with God. God's warm words to us in **Romans 5:1, 9-11** (NLT) addresses both our *ignorance* and *insecurity*: "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. <sup>9</sup> And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, He will certainly save us from God's condemnation. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God." Thirdly, we fall into the trap of seeking to Purchase God's Favor from *insincerity*: Instead of seeking to serve God's interests by furthering the moral and spiritual values of Christ's Kingdom in others, we want God to serve our interests by furthering the goals of our own personal kingdom.

Another needless fear is Fear of God's Purpose; having a deep-seated, sometimes unconscious, fear of what God may do with us if we give Him complete control of our lives. A young couple very much in love were getting married in their church. But this bride and groom were so nervous about the big event and what it meant to turn their lives over to each other that their Pastor chose a verse he felt would be a great encouragement to them, **1 John 4:18**, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." Rather unwisely, however, the pastor asked the best man to read it. The best man was not a regular churchgoer; he didn't know the difference between **John's Gospel** and the **First Letter of John**. He introduced his reading by saying the pastor felt this was a very apt verse for Sue and should speak to the couple's fear of their future. The Pastor would be preaching on it later in the service. Then he read **John 4:18**, where **Jesus** declared to a woman, "You have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband." I suspect the bride and/or the groom may have immediately fainted! God's assurances to us in the Bible, when properly applied, should convince us God's Purpose for us is nothing to fear, but will always be Higher, Holier, and Happier than merely clinging to our own ideas of happiness.

## II. NEEDLESS FEARS

Today we will consider a third needless fear:

### C. Fear That Placates God

"Placate" means, "to appease or pacify." In the pre-Christian world, demonically-inspired views of the gods often drove people to great lengths to placate the anger of their gods, often doing violence to themselves (as did the "prophets of Baal," a pagan god of Canaan, who "shouted loudly, and cut themselves with knives and spears, according to their custom, until blood gushed over them," recorded in **I Kings 18:28**), or

sacrificing adults or even children to regain the favor of their angry gods. Modern research has confirmed such human sacrifice in cultures around the world that continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. How tragic that anyone would believe their Creator or ruler over the spirit realm would be so easily angered and so hard to placate that they would be driven to take such devilish actions to satisfy their god's demands. This is nearly the situation the average Israelite faced at the time the Son of God came to earth to correct such distortions of the character of our Heavenly Father and what it takes to please Him.

Our text tells us a delegation of scribes and Pharisees journeyed from Jerusalem, Israel's spiritual capital, to Galilee. They came to spy upon **Jesus**, hoping to catch Him violating God's laws to brand Him as a false Messiah. Scribes were specialists in God's laws by profession; studying, interpreting, and teaching the Old Testament Scriptures. They also taught traditions handed down by prominent rabbis (Bible teachers and synagogue leaders) over the centuries of how God's laws were to be interpreted and applied in everyday life. Pharisees, from a Hebrew word meaning "separate," were a "sect," a religious party who claimed to be "separated from the world" and striving to live just as the scribes taught Israel's God wanted them to live.

What our text does not tell us, but **Jesus** knew to be true, is the rabbis of His day taught, "To be opposed to the word of the scribes is worthy of greater punishment than to be opposed to the word of the Bible." Why? Because the rabbis believed they'd *improved* upon the Bible. They divided God's Laws of the first five books of the Bible (the *Torah*) into 613 separate decrees: 365 negative prohibitions and 248 positive directives. They then drew arbitrary distinctions of what was "permitted" or "not permitted" by each decree. They sought to regulate every detail of Jewish life: Sabbaths, travel, meals, fast, washings, trade, etc.

God's law commanded Sabbath keeping for Israel; a weekly observance of "complete rest," even during times of planting and harvest. Why did God command a Sabbath rest *from* their "work"? To show Israel they could not gain right standing with Him *by* their works. They needed to have fellowship with a holy God *bestowed* upon them by grace, not *earned* by them (**Exodus 20: 8-11; 34:21, & 31:12-15, NLT**): "The LORD then gave these instructions to Moses: <sup>13</sup> Tell the people of Israel: "Be careful to keep My Sabbath day, for the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant between Me and you from generation to generation. It is given so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy. <sup>14</sup> You must keep the Sabbath day, for it is a holy day for you. Anyone who . . . works on that day will be cut off from the community. <sup>15</sup> You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day must be a Sabbath day of complete rest, a holy day dedicated to the LORD. . . .""

But instead of the rabbis promoting the humility before a holy God the Sabbath laws intended, they promoted their pride; legalistically vying to keep the Sabbath better than others. They imposed a two-character limit upon writing on the seventh day using anything that left a permanent mark. But words could be written on dusty furniture, in the sand, or using juices that evaporated without leaving a stain. Rabbis named carrying any sort of "burden" a violation of the prohibition against "work." They hotly debated whether God would be offended by a man lifting his child on the Sabbath or lifting a lamp to a better position; by a tailor leaving home with a needle in his robe, a woman wearing a wig or a man wearing artificial teeth or an artificial limb. A woman could "wear" a hair clip but not "carry" it as a gift to a neighbor. A spoon could be carried, but only if its "burden" weighed less than one fig. They allowed no more than one swallow of milk to avoid "carrying" a liquid on the Sabbath. Healing was allowed when there was a danger to one's life. But rabbis limited care to keeping a patient from getting worse; no steps could be taken to make one better. Thus, a bandage could be placed on a wound but no ointment.

Such nitpicking rules piled up crushingly upon the common people. They distorted God's heart; making Him an arbitrary tyrant they could never please. No matter how faithfully they sought to serve and honor the LORD God of Israel, the prideful religious leaders branded them as hopeless "sinners" doomed to God's angry judgment (**Mark 2:15-17**). Let's now reread **Mark 7:1-8**. When these scribes and Pharisees faulted

**Jesus** for not following the rabbis' oppressive regulations about physical, ritual cleansing, is it any wonder **Jesus** faulted them as "hypocrites" who had "let go of the commands of God" about the priority God placed on the cleanliness of one's heart? **Jesus** confronted them with their guilt in God's eyes, declaring, "their teachings are merely human rules" and they were substituting "human traditions" for what God said His people should do.

When **Jesus** quoted **Isaiah 29:13** to convict the religious leaders, the Hebrew word translated "worship" in the phrase, "they worship Me [God] in vain," is the same word translated "fear" in **Proverbs 9:10**, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." **Jesus** thus alerts us in this passage there are many false ideas circulating of how God expects His people to "worship" or to "fear the LORD." We have nothing to "fear" by ignoring such needless fears.

## CONCLUSION

Marvyn Saunders wrote to Reader's Digest in 2008 that he and his wife were watching the gorillas at their local zoo when several of them charged at the enclosure fence. Everyone in the crowd scattered, some with cries of fear, except for one elderly man. Later, when they saw this man again elsewhere in the zoo, his wife asked him how he had kept his composure when everyone else panicked. "I used to drive a school bus," he explained. In other words, his life experiences had taught him to know the difference between real danger and falsely threatened danger.

As professed followers of "Jesus Christ, our only Master and Lord" (**Jude 4**), we should be in Awe of Christ's Power, Christ's majesty should inspire deep Reverence for His Person, and we should have such a Passion for His Pleasure that it hurts us to fall short of pleasing Him. This is what it means to fully "fear the LORD." *But we can also dismiss those who teach that we should live in continual dread of angering a God who is unreasonably impossible to please.* Our Heavenly Father does not need to be placated. **Jesus Christ** has already ended forever the hostility that once existed between us and our Holy Creator caused by our defiance of His character standards and authority. **Romans 5:1-2, 9-11** (NLT) says all this perfectly: "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. <sup>2</sup> Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. <sup>9</sup> And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, He will certainly save us from God's condemnation. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God."