

“The Only Thing We Have to Fear”

Security, Peace and Fear – part #6

Matthew 10:26-31

This is the sixth and final week of our series on “Security, Peace and Fear.” In the past five weeks, we’ve heard several great stories of Biblical characters and the fears they faced. Elijah was my favorite – he faced drought, unpopularity, criticism, death, an evil king and queen, 400 false prophets, and a forty-day journey through the desert. In spite of all this, Elijah showed faithfulness in the face of scarcity, overwhelming odds, and depression. Elijah taught us the power of simple, righteous prayers in the face of anxiety.

We also read about Paul and Silas’s choice to praise God while in prison, turning their fears into a courageous witness, and in fact bringing their jailer and his family to salvation in Jesus. We journeyed with the disciples on the boat across the stormy waters of Lake Galilee, walking with Peter on the water, and learning that we are never alone. We learned to always keep our focus on Jesus and take courage, for we can do all things in Christ. In summary, we have learned to face our fears by seeing how these people overcame theirs with God’s help.

I am not one who enjoys haunted houses, but I do have a story about one. I was about 10 years old, and my older brother and his friend, both teenagers, talked me into going through the Haunted House on Mackinaw Island. I don’t remember much, except that it was dark and creepy. The one part I do remember is, a few minutes into this adventure, coming up to a doorway with a sign that read, “If you’re too scared, exit here.” Now, I don’t know why, but my brother and his friend made me go first down the hallway. All of a sudden, the worst, blood curling laugh erupted from the hallway. My brother and his friend

jumped over me and sprinted out the “chicken” exit. I distinctly remember following them shaking, not from fear, but from laughter.

We face our fears all the time, though not always with the results we want. We face fears for our finances, our health, our family and friends. We face spiritual fear, fear of failure, and fear of relationships ending. People are even afraid for our church and our future. We fear attack, we fear persecution for our beliefs.

The list is long.

First century Christians also had fears. They were afraid of the Roman and Jewish authorities. When Jesus sent his original twelve disciples out, Jesus knew they were going to encounter trouble, and they would be tempted to be afraid. It wasn't like any of them had ever done this before. There are indications, as we read the whole chapter of Matthew 10, that the early Christians knew people were persecuting them and even trying to kill these new disciples of Jesus. There were conflicts inside and outside of the fledgling church.

And so Jesus gave his disciples a pep talk with specific directions. He gave them his authority and sent them out into Israel two-by-two to “drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matt 10:1). Jesus told them not to carry any supplies, but to simply go into the towns that would receive them gladly, and shake the dust from their sandals when they were rejected. Jesus warned them that it would not be easy, facing their fears. In fact, some of the things Jesus said sound almost like he was trying to talk them out of the mission! Jesus predicted that they would be arrested, brought in to speak before the authorities, and possibly killed. They might be flogged, brought before kings and

rulers and judges, and have to give their testimony. They might experience betrayal from their own friends and family members.

And we thought we had problems!

And then Jesus simply says, starting in verse 26, “So, don’t be afraid of them.” Really? They all sound pretty scary to me! When someone is about to attack me, I feel afraid. What does fear do? It propels you to action: fight or flight. Defend. Protect. The adrenaline rush prepares your body for the worst possible outcome. Believe me, when that creepy voice laughed in the haunted house, we were definitely moved into action.

So the question we must ask Jesus is, “Why?” Why shouldn’t we be afraid of these people and these things that potentially can cause us great harm?

Because, Jesus plainly says, the things of this world that are wrong will be made right. Gossip will be squelched, truth will be made clear and shouted from the rooftops. There will be no more secrets, because the gospel will be revealed plainly.

And then Jesus makes his main point: the worst that they can do is kill you. Everything hinges here on verse 28. “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Jesus says, fear the One who has the ultimate authority, greater than any king, emperor, priest or judge. There is only One who can destroy the body and the soul. Who is that?

Let me tell you, I used to think, “Well, duh. The devil!” After all, Paul says in Ephesians 6:12, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” It would

seem to me that our greatest battle is against the spiritual forces of this world.

Can't the devil destroy us?

Actually, no, he cannot. The devil does not have that authority. Only the eternal God does. Only God can destroy...or save...both the body and the soul.

So Jesus tells us not to be afraid and to fear God. That seems kind of ironic. But note this: there is a major difference between fearing God and being afraid of God. What did Adam say in the Garden of Eden after eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil? God called out to him, and Adam replied, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid (of you) because I was naked (I had sinned against you); so I hid (from you.)” (Gen 3:10) Note what Adam did not say: He did not say, “I heard you, and I feared you, so I confessed my sin to you.” Had Adam said that, the situation could have had a much different outcome.

Jesus tells us that fearing God is our only priority. It casts out all other fears, because it overwhelms them.

So, why should we fear God? There are the obvious reasons: God is great, almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing. Jesus makes a few comparisons to help us understand that God does not in fact want to destroy us. Jesus says, (verse 29-31) “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” Think of two chickens at the market. You can buy them for a few bucks...and God knows exactly when one of them catches a little cold. Our worth is so much greater in the eyes of God. God knows all of his creation intimately, especially us. God knows our worth. He knows the number of hairs on our head...and when they will start falling out!

When someone knows you that intimately, it is intimidating. But Jesus says this to help us not only fear God, but also to trust God. God ultimately knows what is best for us.

The trouble is, too often we are too focused on the people and the things in this world that want to kill us, literally or figuratively by robbing our joy. What does fear do? It makes you unable to enjoy the life God wants us to have. Remember FDR – President Roosevelt’s famous saying in World War II? “We have nothing to fear, except fear itself.” The fear of the world paralyzes us, disarms us, freezes us, and separates us from the truth. I find it ironic that the midterm elections just ended. Most advertisements I saw intended to make someone afraid of particular candidates, instead of actually demonstrating why we should vote for someone. Why is that effective? Because fear is a strong motivator, if not always an ethical one.

Jesus says the only One we should fear is God. That is a good fear, a fear that drives out all other fears. Did you know that the Bible uses the word “fear” at least 300 times in reference to God?¹ It’s like the Bible is trying to tell us something! I want to share a quote I found in *Christianity Today*. The author asks, “How does fear of God, who is perfect love, take away fear?” And then he quotes William D. Eisenhower in his article 'Fearing God':

Unfortunately, many of us presume that the world is the ultimate threat and that God's function is to offset it. How different this is from the biblical position that God is far scarier than the world When we assume that the world is the ultimate threat, we give it unwarranted power, for in truth, the world's threats are temporary. When we expect God to balance the stress

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/bible-answers/spirituallife/what-does-it-mean-to-fear-god.html>

of the world, we reduce him to the world's equal As I walk with the Lord, I discover that God poses an ominous threat to my ego, but not to me. He rescues me from my delusions, so he may reveal the truth that sets me free. He casts me down, only to lift me up again. He sits in judgment of my sin, but forgives me nevertheless. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but love from the Lord is its completion.²

This is the point. The fear of God does not paralyze us, it drives us to action – loving action. Because we fear God, we worship God. We trust God. Have you ever read C.S. Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia? He uses a great illustration, talking about the God-figure Aslan the lion. Aslan is not a “tame” lion. Aslan is not a “safe” lion. But Aslan is a good lion. Church, God is not safe. God is not someone we can control or predict. But God is good. And we can fear God, because the Bible tells us that is the start of wisdom. (Prov 9:10) And that wisdom is completed in love, which is the greatest motivator.

I simply want to ask you today, how much do you fear God? Are you motivated by fear or guilt when you worship, when you pray? Do you trust God who knows everything about you, or do you run and hide from that thought?

Trust me, if you fear God, you will be persecuted. Why? Because those who do not fear God will notice. Listen to this verse from Job 1:8:

“Then the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.”

Get it? Job feared God, and as a result, Satan opposed Job. Should we not expect the same? When we give more weight to our fears in this world, instead

² Ibid.

of learning to fear God, we move into a realm of depression, disappointment, and denial. We keep our faith secret, and we fail to share the gospel because we are more afraid of what people think of us than what God thinks of us.

We even forget Christ’s promises to us. For example, lots of people are afraid of death. But Christians, of all people, should never be. Death is a natural part of life, and we believe in life that’s eternal. And that’s just one example.

Fear is not part of God’s plan for us. Engaging the mission of the gospel is. We are sent in Jesus’ name, just like the disciples were. And just like them, we will encounter obstacles. But “the mission of the community is ultimately a gift from God, rooted in the authority of Jesus who was sent in God’s name.”³ We must be prepared to encounter resistance, because we are followers of Jesus, a Redeemer who was no stranger to persecution, but who never feared the world.

Yes, God has eternal power over our souls, and we should rightly fear God. But God does not want to destroy us; God even gives us freewill to choose to accept or reject the free gift of eternal life. God wants us to fear him, but also love him, because fear of God drives out all other fears and enables us to live.

Let’s pray.

Memory Verse: Proverbs 19:23 (NLT)

“The fear of the LORD leads to life; then one rests content, untouched by trouble.”

³ Abingdon New Testament Commentary, Matthew 10.