

# FIGHTING *fear* WITH *fear*

LUKE 12:4-7

Gallup has recently constructed a list of **the things that Americans say they fear most**: I have the top 5. Can anybody guess what they might be? (Just shout one out Family Feud style.)

- 1.) Snakes
- 2.) Public Speaking
- 3.) Heights
- 4.) Being Closed in a Small Space
- 5.) Spiders and Insects

As you look at these fears, can you identify one that seems quite different from the others? Which one is it?

I understand numbers 1, 3, 4, & 5. Although God's Word repeatedly commands us not to be afraid and although people are prone to overreact rather severely (even comically) to some of these things, I can see why they are on the list. But #2, the fear of public speaking, is a different type of fear, isn't it? The other four are all about incurring some kind of bodily harm or even death. However, speaking in public very rarely put's anyone's life in danger or is likely to cause permanent physical harm. So how can it be so high on the list of our nation's biggest fears? Why do people dread speaking in public so much?

Well, if you think about it, this fear is not as much about the speaking itself, as it is about how people will react to what we might say or how we might say it. It is the fear that we will mess up and be embarrassed or ridiculed or somehow exposed. The fear of speaking before a crowd really stems from the fear of what the crowd will think or say, right? Ultimately, calling this mentality "the fear of public speaking" is just a tidy way of describing an overarching fear of people and their opinions. And this fear reflects a deep seated desire in all of us to be liked, respected, and approved by people.

In our Scripture text today, however, Jesus very plainly warns us against the fear of man and directs our hearts to the one thing that we should truly fear.

In fact, from a biblical perspective, what is most interesting about this list of top fears is not the many fears that make the list, but one particular fear that isn't mentioned at all: the fear of the Lord. In total, Gallup's list of top fears actually details the 13 things Americans say they most fear, and—amazingly—not one of them had anything to do with God or divine judgment or eternity in hell. Thunder and lightning made the list, but not the Creator who governs them... Getting a shot from a nurse was there, but getting judged before a holy God was not.

Listen, the world around us and perhaps many of us seated in this auditorium this morning are perishing from a puny perspective. According to Gallup, we are more afraid of mice than the almighty Master of all... We are more frightened by the idea of going to the doctor than the idea of going to hell... And among these puny perspectives, the most dangerous of all of all is our tendency to elevate the fear of man above the fear of the Lord... to be more concerned about what people think of us than what God does... to choose the voice of the crowd over the victory of Christ.

With that in mind, I pray we consider carefully our Big Idea for this morning, which is this:

**-- Big Idea: Fear of the Lord alone overcomes the fear of man.**

-- Read Luke 12: 4-7. Pray.

As we examine these commands of Christ this morning, I want us to consider two important imperatives that emerge from the text, the first of which is

### **1.) Lose the fear that makes you falter (v. 4).**

Look again with me if you will the command Jesus gives us as His followers in verse 4. He says, "*I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.*" In essence, Jesus is saying, "Stop being afraid of those who might be able to kill the body but who cannot touch the soul!" In other words, Jesus is imploring us not to fear people, because—when you really think about it—no matter how mighty people may seem on earth, their power over us is very limited.

As it turns out, this passage is one of those sayings of Christ that won't make much sense to people with a puny perspective. When Jesus says "*do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do,*" I think the typical person on the street wouldn't be very impressed. He might say, "Well, of

course there is nothing more they can do because you are already dead! You can't kill a person twice!"

Simply put, this command will only make sense to people whose eyes are fixed upon our eternal home with God. If all our hopes and aspirations are anchored to this world, then we are defenseless against the fear of people, for in that case people can take from us everything we hold dear. Show me someone who is terrified at the thought of death, and I will show you someone who does not see heaven. On the other hand, however, find a person whose eyes are firmly fixed upon the kingdom of God, and you will have found a person whose allegiance to Christ can never be shaken or co-opted by any scheme of man.

This awesome perspective can be seen in the Apostle Paul in Philippians 1:21-24. As Paul waits to hear if he will live or die for his faith in Christ, he declares this: *"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."* No man had any sway over Paul's faith or his joy because everything that mattered most to Paul was waiting ahead in the eternal kingdom of Christ. "Let me live," says Paul, "and I win, for *to live is Christ!*" "Kill me," he continues, "and I win again, for *to die is gain!*" "Heads, I win; tails you lose! You cannot defeat me, for in Christ, I am invincible!"

So I recently watched the latest Avengers movie, in which one of the featured characters is the Incredible Hulk. In one scene near the very end of the movie, Hulk is completely surrounded by about a dozen impressive alien spacecraft, all of which are bombarding his slumped-over body with hi-tech, high-powered, laser-like weapons for a really, really long time. Eventually, the aliens cease fire to see if Hulk is finally dead, and, much to their chagrin, Hulk emerges from the rubble, completely unscathed, and proceeds to smash their alien aircraft into a pile of smoldering rubble. (Grunt!) It would seem, then, that no matter how intense the attack may be, you just can't defeat the Hulk.

Thus, even though you and I are probably not able to transform ourselves into giant, green rage-monsters, if we are in Christ, we are, in fact, a bit like the Hulk, because no matter what malice man may muster or what schemes Satan may devise, you simply can't defeat those who have already been assured victory in Christ. Romans 8:37-39 puts it like this, *"In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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.”*

From this text, then, I pray that it is increasingly obvious to each of us here that it is severe nearsightedness to care more about our body than our souls. While there is value in working out in the gym, there is infinitely more value in “*working out your salvation with fear and trembling.*” While it is fine to develop six-pack abs, it is far better to develop the nine fruits of the Spirit. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “*Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come*” (1 Timothy 4:8).

How do we do it then? That is, if we are determined heed Christ’s command and cast off the fear of man, we must first identify it. That is, what is the fear of man and what does it look like?

We can, I think, find the answer to this question by taking note of the context of this passage. In the verses that immediately precede our text (verses 1-3), we hear Jesus warning His disciples against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. Read there with me. It says, “*In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, ‘Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore 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.’*”

The hypocrisy of the religious leaders that Jesus warns against here is the natural result of men whose lives were immersed in the fear of man. Listen to how Jesus describes this hypocrisy in the previous chapter (chapter 11). In verse 39, we see one description of their hypocrisy: “*You Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.*” In verse 42, we read another: “*But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God.*” And in verse 46, we are told of yet a third example of their hypocrisy: “*Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.*”

From these descriptions, a useful definition of the fear of man emerges, which is this: *The fear of man is the desire to please people above God.* In our Lord’s condemnations of these religious leaders, He scolds them not so much for their

actions, but for the man-centered motivations behind them. He rebukes them because they care more about how *people* perceive them than how they actually stand before *God*. Jesus exposes their deadly fear of man very directly in Matthew 23:2-5, where He says, “*The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach... Everything they do is done for men to see.*”

While I am confident that nobody here wishes to be identified with the Pharisees, shouldn't we admit that we can very easily get caught in the same trap? That is, if we would be honest with ourselves, we ought to confess that it is a whole lot easier to *say* that we live to please God above all than it is sincerely to *live* that way with consistency. Let me ask just a few questions to test our true motivations this morning:

- 1.) *Does your joy ebb and flow with criticism or praise? That is, are you devastated by criticism? Does it make you furious? Do you long to hear people say good things about you?*
- 2.) *Have you ever been paralyzed by the thought of leading out in front of others?*
- 3.) *Do you ever find yourself playing your mistakes or your successes over and over again in your mind?*
- 4.) *Have you ever thought twice about attending church or small group for fear of what someone else there might think or say about you?*
- 5.) *Which opportunity would you claim first: The opportunity to praise God or the chance to be praised by others? Or how about a small twist on that idea: Which do you truly want to see more: Your children exalting God or your children being exalted by people?*

Living to impress people is a pernicious and pervasive temptation, and if we are not constantly at war against it, the fear of man will lodge itself in the desires of our hearts. It will make in our hearts an idol of people, and by it will do its level best to greatly diminishing if not derail altogether or walk with Christ. Paul stresses the very real danger of the fear of man in Galatians 1:10, where he asks, “*For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.*”

Finally, did you notice that when I introduced this verse, I introduced it as the *command* of Christ? That is what it truly is. This warning against people pleasing is a direct command from God through His Word to us as His disciples. You see,

Jesus is not here merely *suggesting* that you and I might be a little better off if we stopped worrying so much about what people think and started thinking more about God's take on things. No, He is commanding us to stop making people so big and God so small. In verse 4, in very plain terms, Jesus is demanding of us that we make every effort to lose this fear that makes us falter—to lose the fear of man and grow in the fear of the Lord.

However, in our endeavor to rid ourselves of the fear of man, we are blessed to remember that Scripture rarely asks to stop doing what is evil without, at the same time, exhorting us to start doing the opposite good. In this case, in the same breath in which Jesus commands us to put off the fear of man, he exhorts us to instill within us the fear of the Lord. In verse 5 of our text today, we read, *“But 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!”*

In other words, more than just losing the fear that makes you falter, our Lord gives us this command...

## **2.) Learn the fear that makes you fearless (v. 5-7).**

Simply put, the single cure to that fear of man that paralyzes us is a fear of the Lord that prioritizes us. You see, we are most holy when we walk in the fear of the Lord, because it is by that motivation alone that our priorities rightly aligned with God's and effectively put into practice. In his outstanding book, *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, Ed Welch puts it like this: “All experiences of the fear of man share at least one common feature: people are big. They have grown to idolatrous proportions in our lives. They control us. Since there is not room in our hearts to worship both God and people, whenever people are big, God is not. Therefore, the first task in escaping the snare of the fear of man is to know that God is awesome and glorious, not other people.” (95)

The fear of man, then, is the very enemy of holy living because it compels us to perform for man's approval rather than to live God's glory. Ultimately, a people pleasing perspective suffocates us beneath the unrelenting reality that we can never satisfy everybody. The fear of the Lord, on the other hand, paves the pathway to righteousness, peace, and joy. It frees us by challenging us to live and serve for an audience of One. It releases us from the coercive grip of people and liberates us to serve our Father in Heaven, who ever and only works for our eternal blessing and joy.

Notice how skillfully Jesus couples His admonition to fear God in verse 5 with a reminder that God is entirely trustworthy in verses 6 and 7. He says, “*Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.*” Thus, in a wonderfully paradoxical way, fearing the Lord is the key to fearless living.

In conclusion, then, know this: For those of us who belong to God’s forever family through faith in Christ, there is a fear that makes us fearless. It is the knowledge that God is infinitely awesome, eternally sovereign, and the one and only judge of all men in all places from every age—and unto Him all people in all places at all times are accountable. As Proverbs 29:25 declares, “*The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.*”

If we have heard the call of Christ this morning, then, let us live each moment of each day with an audience of One. Let us lose the fear on man that makes life puny and causes us to falter, and let us learn the fear of the Lord—the fear by which God makes His people fearless.