

The Fear of the Lord

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From the Kirk Cameron & Ray Comfort Newsletter – March

It is around thirty AD. A Pharisee has invited Jesus of Nazareth to dine with him, but he is amazed beyond words that his special guest didn't go through the procedure of ritualistic washing before He sat down to eat. Jesus turned to him and said that those who went through the ceremony merely cleaned themselves outwardly, but inwardly they were full of wickedness and corruption. He even called them “fools,” because they had no understanding of the God that created them (Luke 11:39-40). He said that they had angered Him by their petty traditions, while ignoring that which mattered...that they were proud hypocrites, likening them to dead bodies in a graveyard. This was all while he was an invited guest at the man's dinner table.

One of the lawyers then leaned forward to defend the teacher's of the Law. Jesus then turned His fiery words to the lawyers and rebuked them for their hypocrisy, calling them the children of murderers, saying that they were accountable to God for condoning the evil deeds of their fathers.

Then He said, “From the blood of Abel to the blood of Zacharias which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.” Abel was the first person to be murdered. Although no physical Law had been given, Cain was the first man to transgress the Eighth Commandment by taking the life of his brother. Zacharius was also murdered. In 2 Chronicles 24:20-21 we are told that when the Spirit of God came upon him he immediately accused the children of Israel of transgression God's Law. That brought about his untimely death. They stoned him in the court of the House of the Lord, and he died between the altar and the Temple.

A similar thing happened when Stephen told the religious leaders of his day that they had violated the Law. They also stoned him to death. The Law of God offends guilty sinners “because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Romans 8:7).

Jesus then accused the lawyers of failing to do what they should. They were lawyers--those who should have been teaching God's Law to Israel, and therefore revealing the exceeding sinful nature of sin. He said, “Woe unto you, lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge: you entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in you hindered.”

Jesus stirred up a religious hornet's nest. He hit it with the baseball bat of rebuke. The scribes and Pharisees began to urge Him vehemently. They provoked Him to say many things, “laying in wait for Him, and seeking to catch something out of His mouth, that they might accuse Him.”

The attacking hornets attracted the attention of an “innumerable multitude.” So many gathered that they were trampling one upon another. This is the scene in which Jesus calls His disciples close to Himself and says:

“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. Therefore whatsoever you have spoken in

darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which you have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops. And I say to you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom you shall fear: Fear him, which after he has killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: you are of more value than many sparrows. Also I say unto you, Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God: But he that denies me before men shall be denied before the angels of God.”

Many times I have read that passage and given a thoughtless “Amen” to it. Jesus said it, therefore I believe it. Amen to it. But think about what you have just read (I trust that familiarity didn't cause you to skip over the verses). He firstly told His disciples to beware of the "leaven" of the Pharisees. Then He reveals that the “leaven” is hypocrisy. Leaven (yeast) puffs up. That's its function, and that's exactly what hypocrisy does. Ask any one who professes to know God (but whose lives don't match their claims), if they think that they are a good person. No doubt they tell you that they are morally upright. I have had many people say, “I'm a very good person.” One man even said, “I'm the best” (I was impressed that I had found the most moral man on earth). However, each (including him) proved to be liars, thieves, and adulterers at heart. They were puffed up with a sense of their own goodness, until the Law did its work in humbling them by showing their true state before God.

Then (in the above passage), Jesus began to bring in the detour sign. He said that God is the ultimate witness to every crime. He is the witness, the judge, and the executioner. Not even one murder--from Abel to Zacharias will go unpunished. Sin will be punished from A to Z. Even every idle word that men speak, they will give an account of on the Day of Judgment. Nobody is getting away with a thing. Not even a lustful thought will go unpunished (Matthew 5:27-28).

After that He said that we shouldn't fear him who can kill the body. Think about that for a moment. How can someone kill your body? He could come at you with a fifteen inch stainless steel serrated-edged meat knife, and plunge it into your chest with such thrust it comes out in the middle of your back. Imagine seeing the unspeakably horrific sight of gushing warm blood surge from your chest as the final seconds of your life empties from your body. Thoughts of such a person attacking you are horrendous. But Jesus said not to fear him. (Amen?)

Or this man could grab you from behind by the hair and violently rip back your head and use the knife's jagged edged blade to slit your warm throat. Take your hand and touch your vulnerable throat and think about how the terror of those seconds can't be put into words. But Jesus said not to fear him.

He could wrap his strong and calloused fingers around your tender throat and take two long minutes to cut off your air supply by strangling you to death. I can't imagine the feeling of panic that would grip me. Blood vessels burst in the eyes of those who die by such a means. But Jesus said not to fear him. Don't fear him? Those three scenarios don't make me fearful, they terrify me, and that terror comes from my God-given instinct to survive. But Jesus said fear not him who can kill the body. What did He mean?

Swallow the Gnat

The Master of teachers often used hyperbole in His teachings. He contrasted love with hate, gnats with camels, hot with cold. Extremes make points. Justified exaggerations paint powerful pictures on the walls of dull minds. This in essence was what He was saying:

Does the thought of having a sharp knife thrust through your chest scare you? Would a vicious murderer strangling the life out of you terrify you? That fear is nothing compared to the unspeakable horror of facing the wrath of Almighty God on the Day of Judgment. He said it would be better to drown with a millstone tied around your neck, rather than fall into God's hands (don't "amen" that without some thought). The Bible warns that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. Words are inadequate to describe the terror of that day. Almighty God is going to tear guilty sinners from their graves and the Law will grind them to powder with eternal justice.

Why then doesn't the world fear Him? Because they have been encouraged in their cultivation of their idols. The seed of idolatry is already waiting to germinate in the imagination, and modern evangelism provides a generous supply of man-made fertilizer to cause it to grow. It has come in the form of another gospel. It is one that runs alongside the true gospel, but it has removed the very elements that produce the fear of the Lord. Gone is the terror of Judgment Day. It tells sinners the purpose-driven lie that "God isn't mad at you, He's mad about you." Who needs to fear God when He has no thoughts of retribution? It has minimized the exceedingly offensive nature of sin by removing God's Law from its message. Sin has merely become something that separates, rather than what it is--an anvil for the Justice of a holy God. "There is no fear of God before their eyes" because we haven't put it there.

Adapted from, *God of Burning Holiness* — an exposition of the fear of God (due to be published June/July 2003).