

# The Approval Trap

## The Snare that Snags You

August 10, 2025

Proverbs 29:25, et al.

## Pastoral Prayer

### *Adoration*

*Lord, we come before You today with hearts lifted high. You are our firm foundation when fear comes knocking. You are the One who calls us into a life bigger than ourselves—into purposes You planned before we ever drew breath. You are the King who reigns with wisdom and kindness, and the Shepherd who leads us with unshakable love. There is no one like You.*

### *Confession*

*Father, we confess how quickly we let shadows grow larger than Your light. We have allowed fear to rule our choices, distraction to pull us from Your presence, and comfort to keep us from stepping into the “more” You have for us. Forgive us for the times we’ve looked to our own understanding instead of lifting our eyes to You.*

### *Thanksgiving*

*We thank You that in Christ, fear has no power to define us. Thank You for giving us a calling that is rooted not in our worthiness but in Your grace. Thank You for the daily mercies that we often overlook—the breath in our lungs, the songs in our mouths, the people in our lives. Thank You for the hope that steadies us and the joy that wells up when we remember who You are.*

### *Supplication*

*God, we look to You today. Give us the strength to stand firm when fear tries to move us. Give us eyes to see the world as You see it, hearts willing to obey, and hands ready to serve. Fill us with such gratitude that it overflows into worship—in our words, in our actions, in the way we love the people around us. Teach us to live as those truly made for more, with all we are and all we have surrendered to You.*

*In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

## Introduction

**(Reader’s note:** The framework for this series follows closely the work of Ed Welch in his book, *When People are Big and God is Small*. Listening or reading these four messages is to be

generally exposed to his entire book, though some content in each message is original or unique to Pastor Rob.)

(Title Slide) Several years ago, I was working in my office in downtown Nashville and was approached by one of my coworkers who asked, “Did you like my Instagram post yesterday?” To which I responded, “Yes, I thought that was really clever and funny. I actually laughed out loud in the living room.” To which this person said, “Well then, why didn’t you ‘like’ my post?”

It wasn’t enough for me to have actually, internally, enjoyed the post. That person needed the external and public validation of their post by me and others to feel good about himself and feel secure in his relationship with those he worked with.

That is but one of countless experiences from our lives that illustrate Proverbs 29:25 – (SLIDE) ***The fear of mankind is a snare, but the one who trusts in the LORD is protected.***

- Have you spent hours curating Instagram posts, checking likes, and refreshing comments ... your mood rising and falling as you do?
- Do you work late, answer emails at all hours, and rarely say no at work—even to unreasonable requests—because you need that affirmation, raise, or sense of being valued?
- Does your child’s performance—socially, academically, spiritually, or athletically—make you anxious or controlling ... maybe crushed when they fail?
- Does a minor disagreement with your significant other spiral you into panic, or does your spouse’s opinion determine your joy or misery?
- Do you tell little white lies or cover things up in order to look better in front of others?
- Does the idea of having a gospel conversation and putting a red pin on that board out there terrifying to you?

If any of these things (and so many more) have ever been true of you (and they have), then you have almost certainly been in the **“the approval trap.”** In effect, when we behave these ways or have these feelings, what’s happened is that we have replaced God with people. Instead of being biblically guided by what the Bible calls **“the fear of the Lord,”** we fear people instead. And here is the dirty little secret that everybody knows but no one likes to admit – (SLIDE) – **What or who we fear ultimately controls us.** It could be social media followers, a boss, a spouse, a child, a congregation, or even strangers. When we elevate their approval, their opinions begin to rule us. Call it peer pressure. Call it people-pleasing. Call it co-dependency. Call it insecurity. The Bible’s phrase for it is “fear of man”, and the fear of man is snare ... it is **life in the approval trap.**

And maybe you’re thinking, “I just need to love myself more.” And yes, that will help you be less dependent on the affirmation of others, but the life of Jesus calls you to something far better.

And then maybe you’d say, “Ah! So I just need to soak in the fact that God loves me more than I know, and that’s enough!” And yes, that, too, is helpful, but sometimes we can use that truth to

feel better about ourselves, as if feeling better about ourselves is our deepest need (hint: it's not ... more about that August 24th).

No, the Bible ... the gospel ... goes deeper still. Deeper than Freud. Deeper than Piaget. Deeper than Sartre. Deeper than Nietzsche. (SLIDE) – **The most radical treatment for the fear of man is the fear of the Lord. God must be bigger to us than people.** And if we can begin to grasp this and practice this and fight for this every day, then our lives are radically transformed in a way that is both wholesome and winsome. **Instead of being people who need people for ourselves (fear of man), we become people who love people for the glory of God. We become people who need people less and love people more.**

It's a 4-week series, but it's a lifetime of application, so let's get started.

## Body

Today, I want to describe for us the nature of the approval trap. I want to describe this snare. Why is it that I fear other people? Why is it that I let others control me? Why do I have this need for others to approve of me? The Bible gives three major reasons.

### People Shame Us

The first of those reasons is this: (SLIDE) – **people shame us.** Put another way, I'm talking about exposure. I'm talking about humiliation. Shame leaves us vulnerable to the fear of man.

Have you ever had that dream where you're in a meeting, or at school, or even walking into church, and suddenly you realize... you're naked? It's a terrible feeling — panic sets in, you're looking for something to cover yourself, and you just want to escape. We have that dream because our subconscious is replaying one of our deepest fears: *What if people really saw me unprepared or inadequate or unacceptable?* That's exposure. That's humiliation. That's shame. And shame fuels our fear of man in two ways.

The first way shame fuels our fear of man is (SLIDE) **through our own sin.** In the garden, Adam and Eve's eyes were opened, and for the first time they felt exposed—not only before God but before each other (Gen. 3:7). What was once a blessing—being fully known—became unbearable. They covered themselves, not because clothing would solve the problem, but because they could not bear the thought of being seen in their sin.

That moment set the pattern for all of us: when we sin, we hide. We build walls, wear masks, and obsess over what others think of us because we cannot stand the possibility of humiliation. We feel the sting of the human gaze more acutely than the gaze of God. **Our sin** makes us insecure and desperate to protect ourselves from being truly known.

**But shame doesn't only come from what we do— (SLIDE) – it can also come from what has been done to us.** Scripture acknowledges the shame of victimization, as when Dinah was “defiled” after being raped by Shechem (Gen. 34:5). Though she had done nothing wrong, her dignity was stolen, and her sense of purity was shattered. This is the pain of abuse, betrayal, or dishonor: you feel naked and unacceptable because of someone else's sin. Whether through adultery, family disgrace, or other violations, victims carry shame that feels indistinguishable from guilt, even though they are not responsible for it. This is why so many who have been hurt by others withdraw, hide, or live under the crushing weight of others' opinions—they fear being seen, exposed, or judged for the sins committed against them.

## Illustration

We have a dog. She came home kennel-trained, but not potty-trained. And one of the things dog trainers or AI will tell you about potty training a dog is if a dog defecates on your living room rug, you're not to punish them (SHAME them), because if you do (and if you keep doing it), they are going to find a place in your home where they can defecate without you easily finding it because they don't want to experience the shame.

And in this sense we are all like dogs: when we sin, we hide. When we are sinned against, we hide. Our sin makes us insecure and desperate to protect ourselves from being truly known, or we fear being seen, exposed, judged or even KNOWN for the sins committed against them.

So, why is it that I fear other people? Why is it that I let others control me? Why do I have this need for others to approve of me? Why am I in the approval trap?

Answer: because people shame us, all because of sin that we do ourselves or sin that others do to us.

## People Reject Us

But there is a second biblical reason, and it's this: (SLIDE) – **people reject us.** And that rejection takes a lot of forms. They ghost us. They ridicule us. They exclude us. They withhold the acceptance and love we expect from them. And as a result, we are left feeling kind of lonely ... kind of like a loser ... like we are somehow less than a person.

But this fear of man due to rejection shows up in more subtle ways. For example, do you ever find yourself singling out certain people and groups for their approval and acceptance because you think they can give you what you think you need? Networking ... brown-nosing ... elbow-rubbing ... we often do these things out of the fear of man, rooted in fear of rejection.

There are TONS of places in the Bible you see this, but consider this one from King Saul. In 1 Samuel 15, God commanded Saul to completely destroy the Amalekites. God then gave the armies of Israel grace to defeat these people, “but Saul and the people spared Agag [the king of the Amalekites] and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the

lambs, and all that was good” (1 Sam. 15:9). When the prophet Samuel confronted Saul with his gross disobedience, Saul confessed his sin but also justified it: “I feared the people and obeyed their voice” (1 Sam. 15:24).

## Illustration

Something very similar happened to me in a church I pastored many years ago. I was 33, standing on 8 years of very successful student ministries and a terminal degree in leadership, and therefore brimming with self-confidence and naive hope in leading and “saving” a struggling church flailing around in the wake of the previous pastor who left abruptly having had a moral failure. For all kinds of reasons, lots of people left the church within the first year (some, good riddance ... some, my bad), and two things became very clear to me: I was incapable of doing the job, and too many people didn’t like me. And the reality of those two things wrecked me mentally and physically into a clinical depression. I had been exposed and humiliated and rejected, and I could not handle it. Why? Because people were big and God was small. Fear. Of. Man. Like Saul, I was idolizing the very people I was lamenting. I was caught in the approval trap.

So, why is it that I fear other people? Why is it that I let others control me? Why do I have this need for others to approve of me? Why am I in the approval trap?

Answer: because people shame us and because people reject us.

## People Harm Us

And there is a third reason from the Bible. (SLIDE) – **The third way the fear of man takes root in our hearts is through real harm—when people have threatened or harmed us physically, emotionally, or spiritually.**

I’m speaking here about danger. Abuse, violence, manipulation, bullying, threats—these are not just wounds to the body but injuries to the soul. This kind of fear often begins as a natural response to danger, but left unchecked, it can morph into a lifelong, controlling fear. People grow in size and influence in our minds because they’ve held power over us—power to hurt us. If the fear of God doesn’t interrupt that cycle, those (awful) people (or people like them) become functional gods in our lives—ones we fear more than we fear God.

You see this dynamic in Abraham’s life. Though God had promised to bless and protect him, Abraham feared the Egyptians would kill him to take his wife. So he devised a self-protective lie: “Say you are my sister” (Gen. 12:13). He did it again in Genesis 20. In those moments, the threat of man outweighed the promises of God. The Egyptians were big. God was small. Abraham’s story shows that even the faithful struggle with fear when physical harm is on the table—but it also shows that trusting God in the face of fear is what sets God’s people apart (Gen. 22:12).

We see this same pattern in the lives of abuse victims today. Ed Welch is a counselor and faculty member at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF). He writes about one of his clients (let's call her JANE) being a survivor of years of violence and abuse from her father and brother. Even after confronting her abusers and living in a safe environment, she remains paralyzed by fear. She tries to function, but every interaction (especially with men in authoritative positions) feels threatening. Her past perpetrators still seem bigger than God. In her case—and in many like hers—fear of man is not a shallow insecurity. It is the long shadow of past trauma. She's still looking to people for safety and security. And what we're going to see in the rest of this series is that healing can begin for those of us who are hurt by others when we stop looking to other people for our safety and start holding fast to the words of God until they reshape our hearts.

## Conclusion

So, why is it that I fear other people? Why is it that I let others control me? Why do I have this need for others to approve of me? Why am I in the approval trap?

- Because people shame us all because of sin that we do ourselves or sin that others do to us
- Because people reject us
- Because people harm us physically, emotionally, or spiritually

So what is the solution? How do we stop living with people being big and God being small? How can God be big and people be right-sized? How do we get out of the approval trap?

I take you back to Proverbs 29:25 – (SLIDE) – ***The fear of mankind is a snare, but the one who trusts in the LORD is protected.***

The wisdom writer calls on us to make a switch – to put God in the place He's supposed to be, and people in the place where they are supposed to be – and that will result in a far better life.

But what makes God different? On what basis should we put our trust in God? Why should I fear God? What makes Him worthy of being on that pedestal in a way that makes me whole instead of making me a wreck?

The answer is Jesus. Who Jesus is and what He has done makes Him and Him alone worthy of our reverential fear ... of our trust. He and He alone belongs on the pedestal in our hearts.

Here's the amazing thing about Jesus:

**(SLIDE) – You fear people will shame you — but Jesus was shamed for you.**

On the cross, Jesus bore not just your guilt but your shame. He was stripped, mocked, and publicly humiliated. Isaiah 53:3 calls Him “despised and rejected by men.” The Holy One took

the place of the ashamed so that your nakedness could be clothed in His righteousness. If you are in Christ, you are fully known and never rejected. You don't need to hide anymore — He sees all of you and still says, "Mine."

**(SLIDE) – You fear people will reject you — but Jesus was rejected for you.**

He was not only betrayed by friends and denied by Peter — He was forsaken by God so that you never would be. On the cross, Jesus bore the full weight of divine and human rejection. And now? He welcomes you. He does not roll His eyes at your weakness. He doesn't withdraw when you fail. He calls you "beloved" — not because you earned it, but because He gave it.

**(SLIDE) – You fear people will harm you — but Jesus was harmed to protect you.**

The cross was the ultimate injustice — the truly innocent One hurt and killed by sinful people. But in His death, Jesus disarmed the powers that truly threaten us (Col. 2:15). He defeated sin, death, and Satan. And now, even though people may wound you, they can't destroy you. Jesus is your fortress. He's your defender.

Why go to Jesus?

Because no one else can cover your shame, welcome you in your rejection, or protect you from ultimate harm. Because Jesus was shamed ... because Jesus was rejected ... because Jesus was harmed ... ALL in our place, He is the One who should be ultimately feared/loved/trusted.

The approval trap says, "I need you to love me so I can be okay."

But Jesus says, "I already love you. You're already okay."

If you're ruled by the need for approval, let Jesus free you. If you're carrying shame, let Him cover you. If you've been rejected, let Him embrace you. If you've been hurt, let Him protect you. **(SLIDE – TITLE SLIDE).**

## Closing Prayer

*Father, we thank You that You entered into our fears and carried them to the cross. You were exposed so our shame could be covered, rejected so we could be accepted, and harmed so we could be eternally safe. In You we are known, loved, and secure.*

*Help us to see You as greater than people. Quiet the whispers of the fear of man, and heal those carrying wounds of rejection or harm. Teach us to walk in the freedom of fearing You above all else, so that our lives display the unwavering hope of Jesus in every generation.*

*Amen.*