

The Approval Trap

The Fear that Frees You

August 17, 2025

Proverbs 29:25, et al.

Pastoral Prayer

Baptism

Welcome

Father, You are the great God—mighty and awesome—above every power and authority. You show no partiality, accept no bribes, nor enter into any bargains. You defend the cause of the fatherless and the widow, You care for the outsider, and You provide food for the hungry. Today, we magnify Your name. You have done great things for us. Your mercy extends from generation to generation, and we desire to see that mercy known in every generation here at Beech Haven.

Lord, in Your light there is no shadow where sin can hide. You see all our steps. We confess that we often wander in thought, word, and deed. Search us by Your Spirit, reveal what is unconfessed, and lead us in repentance. Thank You that in Christ we are forgiven, clothed in righteousness, and restored to walk with integrity before You.

Give us clean hearts, O God. Teach us to turn from every idol and flee from the things that corrupt our souls. Shape our desires so that we love what You love and hate what You hate. Make us a people who start from Scripture—feeding on Your Word daily—so that our lives reflect Your truth in every decision, every conversation, and every relationship.

We ask for wisdom and faithfulness as stewards of all You have entrusted to us—our time, our talents, our treasure, the truth of the gospel, and the relationships You've placed in our care. Strengthen us to walk together in love, to involve every age in the work of ministry, and to serve beyond ourselves in this city and to the ends of the earth.

We pray for those in authority over us, from our local leaders to those in our state and nation. Grant them justice, humility, and wisdom. We ask for revival in our land, for Your Spirit to awaken hearts to the hope of Jesus, and for Your church to shine like a light in the darkness.

Thank You, Lord, that You are faithful, keeping covenant love to a thousand generations of those who love You. Thank You for the countless ways You have shown kindness to this church. May we remember and proclaim Your goodness. And we look forward with hope to the day when we will see our Redeemer face to face. Until then, keep us walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus, our Savior and King. 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.)

Last week we began this series by naming the approval trap—that subtle but suffocating way we replace the fear of the Lord with the fear of people. We saw that Proverbs 29:25 calls it a “snare,” and we traced three reasons it so often catches us: **people can shame us, reject us, and even harm us**. When people are “big” and God is “small,” their opinions, acceptance, or threats can control our choices and shape our identity.

I'd given anything to understand this in college and young adulthood. I made a number of weird and unfortunate choices back then because I was constantly trying out different people on the throne of my life. (Tell golden cross story).

Thanks goodness for the gospel answer we saw last week: Jesus took our shame, endured our rejection, and absorbed ultimate harm on the cross so that we could be fully known, fully loved, and eternally secure in Him. That He did that makes Him the only One truly worthy of our fear ... of our awe ... of our worship. And the only way out of the approval trap is to make God bigger in our hearts than people. And that's exactly where we turn today.

Body

What is the Fear of the Lord?

Now, when you hear the phrase “fear of the Lord” or “fear of God” you might be confused by the word “fear.” We most commonly use the word “fear” in a negative context ... meaning, there are things in our life that cause us terror or dread and we fear them.

There are a lot of interesting fears or phobias out there. **(SLIDES AS ROB LEADS)**

- **Lachanophobia: Fear of vegetables.**
- **Nomophobia: Fear of being without a phone.**
- **Pogonophobia: Fear of beards.**
- **Omphalophobia: Fear of belly buttons.**
- **Phobophobia: Fear of developing a phobia.**

This is what we typically use the word “fear” for in English ... something we dread Something that horrifies us. So when we hear “Fear of God,” we might instantly think about being terrified of God.

There are, indeed, moments in the Bible in which people have been rightly terrified by God.

- Exodus 19 will terrify you just reading it. It's a volcanic eruption, earthquake and raging forest fire all happening at once.
- Isaiah became "undone" in his soul when he saw the Lord in a theophany.
- When Peter, James, and John experienced the transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew 17, they put their faces on the ground in abject terror.

But when I say that instead of having a "fear of man" we need to have a "fear of the Lord," I don't mean that we need to live in constant, abject terror of God. That's not the way the Bible means it in this context. In this context, "fear of the Lord" means this:

A reverent submission that leads to obedience.

I'm talking about astonishment ... awe ... reverence ... devotion ... trust ... reliance ... worship. This kind of fear starts with knowing the truth about ourselves—that we are sinful—and the truth about God—that He is perfectly pure, just, and rightly angry at sin. But it also rests in the rock-solid reality of His forgiveness, mercy, and love. It is to live simultaneously with the fact that God is transcendent and immanent. It is to recognize and revel in the fact that, as Romans 3 puts it, God is both JUST and the JUSTIFIER. That He is simultaneously holy and loving. That GOD took shame and rejection and harm ... GOD did ... for us. And that kind of knowledge pulls us toward Him to worship. It makes us walk humbly with Him, and it makes obedience not a burden, but a joy.¹

It is not hard to intellectually grasp this. Cognitively, we can pretty easily understand these words and truths about God.

Further, it's pretty logical to us that the bigger God is in our hearts, the smaller people will be in our hearts.

But yet so often, we are caught in the approval trap. When it comes to our real, everyday lives, people remain bigger and God remains smaller. So, it's not enough to intellectually agree that God alone is worthy to be feared, and that doing so keeps us out of the snare of the approval trap. We have to DO SOMETHING with that truth, and that "something" is remarkably yet often challenging – **we have to cultivate it**. We have to develop it. Like a muscle ... like a skill ... growing in our fear of the Lord takes discipline and patience. We cannot microwave our spirituality. We have to cultivate it.

Cultivating the Fear of the Lord

Now, to help us start cultivating the fear of the Lord in our lives, let's look at how it developed in the lives of Jesus' disciples and others who came in touch with Jesus. Sometimes seeing it in

¹ Derived from Welch, p. 81.

story form or in the form of experience is more helpful than a lecture, and the Gospel of Mark was largely written for such a purpose.

The Gospel of Mark could easily be called “the Gospel of Amazement.” Page after page, Mark shows us crowds and disciples left stunned at the words and works of Jesus. Sometimes that amazement turned into worship and obedience, sometimes it didn’t—but it was always Mark’s way of teaching us: this is no ordinary man; this is the Holy One of God in the flesh.

From the very beginning, Mark says people were astonished at His teaching (Mark 1:22), amazed when He commanded unclean spirits to leave (1:27), and left in wonder when He forgave the sins of a paralytic and told him to walk (2:12).

Then comes a moment that took the disciples’ awe to a new level. It’s the one that Colby read for us. A storm on the Sea of Galilee roars so fiercely it threatens to sink their boat. The waves are breaking over the side, and Jesus is asleep—dead asleep—in the stern. When they wake Him, He doesn’t grab a bucket or a rope. He speaks: “Silence! Be still!” And in an instant, the water is like glass.

They had already seen Him heal the sick, cast out demons, and preach like no one else. But this time is different. Mark says, “They were terrified and asked one another, ‘Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!’” (4:41). They got to the other side alive, but there’s no relief in their reaction—only a deep, trembling awareness that the One in the boat commands the wind and the waves. That’s the fear of the Lord taking root.

Mark goes on to tell us about miracle after miracle—demons sent into pigs (5:20), a little girl raised from the dead (5:42), the deaf and mute healed (7:37), Jesus walking on water (6:51). Over and over, people are amazed. But one moment in particular stands out.

In the middle of a crowd pressing in on Jesus, a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years reached out and touched His robe. She had spent everything on treatments and only gotten worse. But she thought, If I just touch his clothes, I’ll be made well. Not maybe healed. Not hopefully healed. She knew. And she was right. Power went out from Jesus, and she was made whole.

Plenty of people touched Him that day. Only one touched Him with faith. She moved from amazement to belief, and from belief to action. She teaches us that awe of Jesus isn’t meant to leave us standing there with our mouths open—it’s meant to lead us to trust Him enough to reach out.

Later, on the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus took Peter, James, and John aside and gave them a glimpse of His divine glory. His face shone like the sun, His clothes became dazzling white, and Moses and Elijah appeared, talking with Him. The disciples were terrified. Peter, grasping for words, suggested building shelters for all three—but God Himself cut him off: “This is my beloved Son; listen to him!”

They fell on their faces in fear, but Jesus came to them, touched them, and said, “Get up; don’t be afraid.” In that moment, the holy love of God stood right in front of them—awesome in power, tender in mercy. **That’s the fear of the Lord:** the One who can make you tremble is also the One who draws you near.

These moments show us how the fear of the Lord grows ... how it’s cultivated. (SLIDE IMAGE)
 – We start with amazement at what Jesus says and does. That amazement deepens into a trembling awareness of who He really is. And if we follow Him long enough, that awe will lead us to faith, and that faith will lead us to act—to trust, to obey, to worship. That’s how it happened for the disciples. And it’s how it can happen in us.

The Gospel and the Fear of the Lord

All these moments in Mark—storms stilled, demons driven out, the sick healed, the dead raised—were shaping the disciples’ understanding of who Jesus really was. Each scene was a lesson in the fear of the Lord, slowly moving them from amazement to faith to obedience. But all of it was leading somewhere. Because as astonishing as it was to watch Him teach with authority, command creation, and even reverse death for others, the ultimate lesson in the fear of God would come when Jesus faced death Himself. What happened at the cross and the empty tomb is the most awe-inspiring reality of all—and it’s where our fear of the Lord finds its deepest roots.

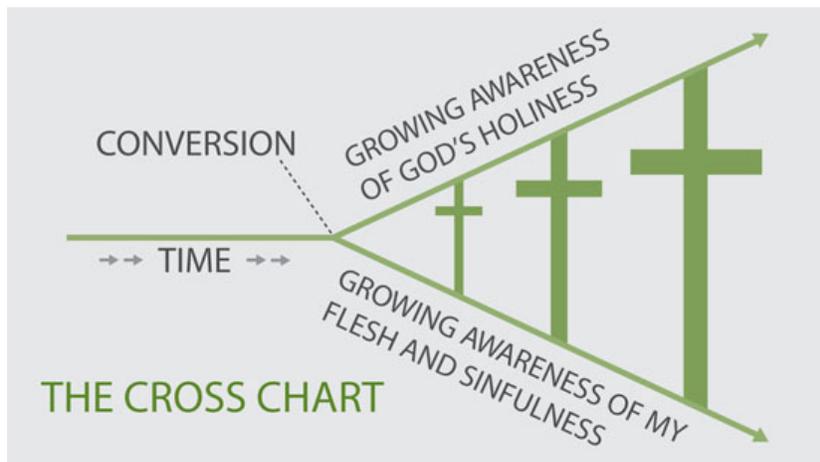
On the cross, holy love and holy justice meet. In love, “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, CSB). In justice, sin could not be ignored or excused, so “He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21, CSB).

And Mark tells us that the clearest confession of who Jesus was at His death didn’t come from a disciple or a family member—but from a hardened Roman centurion who had likely presided over countless executions. Watching Jesus die, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39, CSB). No sermon, no miracle—just the way Jesus gave His life left this soldier in awe.

Three days later, the empty tomb pushed that awe to its proper conclusion. Mark says the women fled “because trembling and astonishment overwhelmed them” (Mark 16:8, CSB). Fear and amazement gripped them—not terror that drives you away, but holy fear that draws you near.

This is where our amazement at Jesus must always end: not simply in wonder at what He can do, but in worship of who He is—the crucified and risen Son of God. When you see Him laying down His life for your sins and then rising to crush death, people’s opinions start to lose their grip, and God gets bigger in your heart than you ever thought possible. That’s the fear of the Lord—and it is learned best at the foot of the cross and the mouth of the empty tomb.

Simply put, to cultivate the fear of God in our lives, we have to grow in our amazement at the gospel.



Conclusion

Does God terrify you? I invite you to consider Jesus. In Him we see that God is truly mighty, and He is mighty to save. So now, we need not be terrified. We can come near in reverent obedience and love because of the work of Jesus.

SLIDE – (Faith/Baptism/ETC)

Have you been complacent? Look again until awe grips you. Determine now to set about cultivating the fear of God in your life.

- **Daily:** Read Scripture *first* for who God is, not just what to do.
- **Weekly:** Share with someone one thing about God's greatness you saw that week.
- **Regularly:** Get outside. Let creation remind you how small you are and how big He is.
- **Intentionally:** Pray Psalm 86:11 — "Unite my heart to fear Your name."

Live today so captivated by Him that people's approval loses its grip.

Prayer

*Who else commands all the hosts of heaven?
 Who else could make every king bow down?
 Who else can whisper and make darkness tremble?
 What other beauty demands our praise?
 What other splendor outshines the sun?
 What other majesty rules with justice?
 What other glory consumes like fire?*

*What other power can raise the dead?
What other name remains undefeated?
Who else could rescue me from my failing?
Who else would offer His only Son?
Who else invites me to call Him Father?*

Only You Father. May we be drawn near to worship You.