

The Fear of the Lord and a Godly Lifestyle

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[0 : 0 0] Have you ever noticed that in the Bible there are certain themes that, well if properly understood can be really life-giving and healing and liberating, but if misunderstood can be very destructive?

I think that's the case when it comes to our theme today, which is the fear of God. Nehemiah urged those around him who were exploiting an economic crisis for their own personal advantage to start walking in the fear of God.

Proverbs 9 verse 10 says that fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom. So what does that mean? Well first let's look at what it doesn't mean.

Let's think about how the term fear of God might be so damaging when it's misunderstood. Perhaps one of the most damaging misunderstandings is when people decide to dismiss the credibility of Christian truth claims, on the basis that if God is to be feared, then God can't be loving.

With that distorted idea, a fearful God means a cruel and unkind God. A God who has disdain for people or for certain types of people.

[1 : 2 5] A God who has more to do with condemnation than salvation. A God who has more to do with condemnation than salvation. But that's not the God we meet in the Bible. Jesus said he came not to condemn but to save.

And 1 John tells us that God is love. That there is no fear in love and that perfect love drives out all fear. So whatever the fear of God does mean, it can only be properly understood through the lens of the conviction that God is first and last love.

Another profound misunderstanding is that to fear God means to be scared of God. Tragically, you can always tell when someone lives their life with that sort of belief.

There's usually something quite brittle and insecure about their faith. And indeed, that can find its way into the way they relate to other people. A.W. Tozer was right when he said that what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

If we're scared of God, then our life and our character will probably reflect that. That's because if you're scared of something, you generally try to run away from it.

[2 : 4 6] And since it's quite difficult to run away from God, you'll find you're always on the run. But again, that's not the God we meet in the Bible.

The very opposite, in fact. God continually sends angels with the message, Do not be afraid. He's the God who in Jesus comes to us to draw us near, not scare us off or drive us away.

And Romans chapter 8 tells us that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. So what does the Bible mean when it talks so positively about fearing God as something that's important and that we should all do?

I think godly fear is important because it's what keeps us alert to God's awesomeness and God's holy otherness.

Lose sight of that and we're in danger of becoming all too casual about our relationship with God. Of course, Christian faith is all about a personal relationship with God, but that's not something to be taken lightly.

[3 : 55] And yet, how easy it is to take it all too lightly. In the story of Nehemiah, we see believers who are actively engaged in the project of restoring the wall and following the will of God.

We see these very people take their eye off the ball spiritually. A food crisis is happening and those with assets and a shrewd business mind begin to profit from those who don't have such resources.

These are people who, in many ways, are very faithful and who are in a relationship with God. But they've started to get just a bit too casual about it.

Their moral conscience has become relaxed and they've managed to persuade themselves that their business practice is quite acceptable because it's quite normal. Well, it might be normal.

It might be what everyone else does. But it's not what God desires. Their fear of God has been eroded. And they've become all too casual about connecting their faith with their lifestyle.

[5 : 11] Two and a half thousand years might separate us from them, but the challenge remains. God continues to call us into a relationship with him. With that honour comes responsibility.

It's a loving relationship, but it's not a cosy one. When we start getting casual in our relationship with God, we'll find ourselves getting lazy in the way we apply scrutiny in making decisions.

We'll start to lose accountability in our lifestyle and integrity in our character. We've become too ready to accommodate habits that will stop us flourishing as the human beings that God wants us to be.

Growing as a disciple of Jesus is a process that lasts a lifetime. With eternity will come perfection, but we're not there yet. And so throughout this life, we have an ongoing daily calling to keep on growing ever deeper and ever closer in our relationship with God, being transformed bit by bit.

I used to think that with spiritual maturity, temptation leaves us alone or somehow gets less.

[6 : 31] But that's not how it works. You can't outgrow temptation. Not in this life, no matter how godly and mature you become. And it's dangerous to think you can.

Remember, Jesus himself was tested and tempted right up to the final moment of his death on the cross. We don't grow out of temptation, but we can grow more effective at resisting it.

And that's where growing in godly fear is such an important part of growing in loving God. When you fear God because you love God, you're empowered.

Empowered to stand firm against temptation and empowered to walk in freedom. And so it is that Proverbs 9 verse 10 says that the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom.

Think of it like this. The fear of bombs is the beginning of wisdom about bombs. Someone might know everything there is to know about bombs, except for the fact that they're dangerous.

[7 : 39] In which case such knowledge is rendered completely useless. Imagine you called out the bomb disposal expert and they said to you quite casually, I'll just chuck this thing in the back of the car and take it home and work on it tonight.

Remember, to fear God is not to fear God or to think that God is in any way unloving. It is to know God's power, God's holiness, and so to love God all the more for that.

Remember, the art of discipleship can be understood as learning how to carry a full cup with a steady hand. Let's pray.

Lord, thank you that in Jesus you reach out to us, calling us into a living, loving relationship with you. Forgive us for whenever we've taken that casually or lightly.

May we always be aware of your holiness and the grace upon which we depend. May we grow in you each and every day.

[8 : 57] Amen.