

Called to Live in Fear and Freedom

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Date: 29 October 2017

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] As part of our series, looking at lessons that we might learn from the early church, as presented in the Bible and the book of Acts, we're thinking today about what it might mean as a church today to live out a calling in both fear and freedom.

When you hear those words, fear and freedom, then probably instinctively we would say, well, how do those two go together? One seems a very positive concept, the other seems very negative. How can it be as a Christian that we're called to live in fear and freedom?

What I want to suggest to you is every single one of us has fears. We all have fears of some kind. At times they may really surface in our lives, and when that happens, it's ugly. It's horrible.

At least a certain type of fear is. But with faith in God, we discover a new sense of fear, a different type of fear, a fear that's a good fear, a positive one, a healthy one.

And when we discover that sense of fear, it puts all others in perspective and we find freedom.

What is it that you have as your negative type of fear?

[1 : 16] We'll come back to that right at the end when we come to pray. First, a story. I love today's Bible reading. I love it because I find it so difficult.

It's one of those stories that is definitely not an easy one to read. It's not easy to swallow. It's not a fluffy reading. It's a jagged, edged reading because it's so challenging. There's a story of three ministers that met together, and they were discussing, arguing would be a better word, about the best way of funding the church.

And they got on to the subject of offerings on a Sunday. And one of them said, well, you know, we tend to, we're sort of phasing out having any sense of offering, but we do still encourage people to give through using the envelopes and putting a check and gift-aiding it and putting it in an envelope because that's really the way to go.

And another one, another minister said, oh, actually, you're a little bit behind the times there. We actually encourage everyone to give by standing order. That's a much more efficient way. And gift-aided as well, of course.

The third minister said, oh, actually, I totally disagree. We still have cash, and we insist on cash offerings. And what I like to do is I like to physically get the plate passed around and then take it in my hands, and right at the end, I throw the thing as hard as I can up into the air.

[2 : 36] As I pray, receive, oh, Lord, all of these gifts that these fine, generous people have offered to you. And if it's your desire, dear Lord, to bless me as their pastor today, then in your sovereign and miraculous strength and power, I beseech thee to rain back on me all that you want me to put into my personal bank account.

The story that we have this morning is about the way in which the early church structured their giving. We see mind-blowing generosity of people brought everything they had and laid it before God in his service, his kingdom, and of his church here on earth.

And it would be a great passage, perhaps, to use if our subject this morning was about money and how we handle it and how we offer it in the Lord's service. But that's not actually our subject.

You see, I want to suggest to you that this story, whilst it is about that subject, I think there is something even deeper than that going on here that it exposes. It's about truth and integrity and a sense of what it means to have that godly fear that brings with it a new sense of freedom.

Let's just rewind some 2,000-odd years back to this reading that we've had this morning. The church was very, very young. It was still in its infancy. Living very, very close to Jesus' historic resurrection.

[4 : 16] The Holy Spirit had come. The people that we are reading about here are the first generation of Christian believers. The gospel was literally in their hands. Were it not for these

people, the New Testament would not have been written.

And they had an agreed understanding over how they would live and ensure that all the needs were met. I want to suggest that Ananias and Sapphira's wrongdoing was not that they had sold and held back money, although that is what the reading is telling us, but that there's something even below that, namely that they had broken trust.

They had decided, maybe unwittingly, but in a kind of casual way, that they didn't need to live by the same frame of reference that had been agreed upon.

I've come across two interpretations of what is perhaps the hardest part of this passage, namely that the two figures there, Ananias and Sapphira, that they dropped down dead.

The first interpretation is that they were quite literally, supernaturally struck down. The second interpretation is that upon realising the seriousness, the gravity of what they had done, they were so overwhelmed by fear that they collapsed and died.

[5 : 51] We can neither prove nor disprove which of those interpretations is the truth, but either way, they still raise exactly the same theme, and it is this.

It is fear. There is such a thing as a healthy sense of fear. And these words, the events in this story, expose the reality that things go wrong when we live by the wrong type of fear.

Now let's just think about that theme of fear, fear as a healthy thing. Or rather, let's think of an unhealthy sense of fear.

The sense of fear that has to do with dread. The sense that drives people away from God because they fear that God is such a terrible, terrible, vindictive being.

You know, whatever else, that kind of guilt-inducing, scaremongering fear is not the type of fear that the gospel is about. It can't be. Because John tells us that there is no fear in love.

[6 : 59] Perfect love drives out fear. So whatever else fear means, it doesn't mean that when we're talking about the kind that is healthy and that God desires of us. God is an awful God.

A-W-E or full. Not an awful God. A-W-F-U-R. So what might be that sense of awe-inducing, awe-inspiring, healthy, wholesome, helpful, life-giving, energy-breathing, Holy Spirit instilled fear be about.

A number of years ago, there was a theologian called H.H. Farmer. And H.H. Farmer, he was a biblical scholar, would say to his students, you can't be pally with God.

And they used to, the students under H.H. Farmer, used to, they coined the phrase, they used to say, you can't be pally with the farmer. Because he had said, you cannot be pally with God.

And when he said that, you can't be pally with God, what he wasn't doing was denying the importance of the sense of the personal relationship with God, which is central to the Christian gospel.

[8 : 19] He wasn't denying that. But what he was warning of us was the danger of embracing a gospel that so, so emphasizes the personal that we lose sight of the sense of mystery and the power of God.

You see, first and last and everything in between, being a Christian isn't just about knowing about God, it's about knowing God, it's about loving God, it's about living that relationship with God in a very deep, real, meaningful and personal way.

It's about knowing Jesus as your friend, it's about knowing God as your father, it's about knowing him and listening for him in our daily lives and having that relationship that is built on love and grace and peace.

But when we use all of that language, if we're going to be true to scripture, if we're to be authentic with it, what it doesn't mean is that it's just a casual thing by which there is no sense of mystery.

And when H.H. Farmer said, you can't or you shouldn't be pally with God, I think that is what he was driving us towards. You see, there is such a thing as an important, helpful kind of fear.

[9 : 37] Think of fire. Now, fire can be one of the greatest, most helpful resources. It can save life. It can keep us warm.

It can be creative. It can kill off germs. But if it's not treated with anything other than fear and respect, it can kill us.

A major challenge to us today as a church in the widest global sense, I would suggest, is that we recapture such radical respect and recognition of God's power.

That God blesses us and God longs us to know his blessing. But as Christians, we need to relearn the importance of being able to carry a full cup with a steady hand.

these words of Scripture today bring us to that point where we are called to rediscover something of what it means to live in a wholesome and healthy and constructive kind of fear.

[10 : 48] And that means rediscovering the sense of the reality of prayer and expectation that when we pray, something genuinely supernatural is taking place.

There's a story of three religious leaders meeting together discussing the best positions for prayer. And this conversation was taking place in a room that happened to have a phone connection, their landline, and in the background was a man repairing the phone line line, the landline connection. Well, one of the leaders there was saying, well, I believe that when you pray, there is only one way to pray and that is by kneeling. That's the way to pray with dignity.

Another leader was there and said, no, no, no, I don't agree with that at all. It is a far better way to pray with your arms outstretched looking upwards. That is the best way to pray.

[11 : 56] There was another leader there that said, no, no, no, the best way to pray is prostrate. You should lie down on the floor with your face flat out of respect.

The telephone repair guy couldn't help overhearing the conversation and just as he was leaving, he chimed in, well, the best praying that I've ever done was when I was hanging upside down from a telegraph pole.

Isn't there a real sense in which we pray in a way that is far more dynamic, and by that what I mean is personally meaningful and engaging, where we are truly paying attention when we are on the edge, when we are in those situations where we are feeling vulnerable.

And notice, well, you won't have noticed because it wasn't projected onto the screen, but in the book of Acts, the verse immediately preceding the story that we read this morning, we're told in verse 31 of Acts chapter 4, just before we get all of the other story about how the believers shared their possessions and lived sacrificially together, it says that the believers were gathered together and they were praying, and it says, after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

that's the context of everything else that happens, that was the thing that underpinned the life of the early church, that they had that sense that prayer isn't just a religious activity, it's a sense of knowing the reality of God's presence, knowing and in an expectant way that God is a God to be feared in a positive kind of way, in the same way that we fear something awesomely powerful like fire.

[13 : 50] God is there on the move, calling us to be a part of his movement, and we are called to live in that sense of fear, but that fear that brings with it a new freedom.

the church is ill-served when we dilute or deny the demands of the gospel, and we lose sight of the importance of that fear that actually sets us free.

One last story. thing. I read a while ago of one way in which in some parts of the world they train elephants. You never know when you might need that piece of information.

And what they do is they take the elephant and they take a very, very strong chain and attach one end of the chain to a very, very strong tree and the other end to one of the feet of the elephant.

And just out of the elephant's reach they place some food. Now for several days the elephant will try really hard to get to the food. But every time it does so it tugs on the chain and it causes pain and it can't quite reach the food.

[15 : 15] This goes on for several days until the elephant has come to accept that it cannot reach the food. It accepts its limitations. It has been conditioned.

And at that point they can then remove the chain and replace it with a rope. Now the rope actually isn't that strong and the elephant could easily snap it at any point.

However by this stage it has been so trained and conditioned to accept what it thinks are its limitations that it will simply not try to stray away from where it is.

However there's one exception and that is if fire breaks out near where the elephant is. Because at that point the elephant's instinctive fear of fire will overtake its fear of pain or indeed anything else and it will just bolt.

The rope will snap and apparently if that happens you will never ever train or condition that particular elephant again. The fear of God in the best, most wholesome, positive and life-giving way brings us that kind of freedom.

[16 : 43] It puts all other fears into perspective and holds them in check. Sure, things happen in our lives that make us feel afraid, that make us worry, that will from time to time keep us awake at

night.

But they're given a new perspective for ultimately God. God is there. God is the one who is all-powerful.

And whilst there are things in this life that do not make sense to us right now, things that we can't quite get our minds around, things that come our way, things that worry about us, we know in the depths of our being that God is bigger and greater than it all.

And when we have that sense of respect, that sense of healthy, wholesome fear for him, everything else is put in its place.

things. So let's come back to that question that I started with. What sort of things do we live in fear of?