

Overcoming the Crippling Fear of Man – 1

By David de Bruyn

It is a sin that all humans are guilty of. Young and old, rich and poor, black and white – all people are guilty of it. Most people are only vaguely aware of its nature as a sin, and an even smaller percentage are aware of its true root. It is the crippling sin of the fear of man.

Before you think I am dealing only with fearing an attack from other people, let me be quick to define the fear of man as replacing God's rightful place in our lives with other people. With that definition, the fear of man is not something limited only to fearing criminals. The fear of man manifests itself in many different ways. To list just some of them:

When we are continually concerned about image before others, when we are anxious over how people see us - that is the fear of man.

When we stick to clothing and accessory fashions religiously, worrying if we are wearing something that is no longer 'in' - that is the fear of man.

When we are giving in to so-called peer pressure; when we are conforming to our culture uncritically - that is the fear of man.

When we are controlled by dieting, bodybuilding, and other physical enhancements to our appearance to where it has gone way beyond being a steward of our bodies – that is the fear of man.

When we are excessively competitive, needing to win whatever we do, from a game of volleyball to the promotion at work – that is the fear of man.

If we are obsessed with success, or in cold fear over failure – that is the fear of man.

When we are easily embarrassed in group situations, when we continually second-guess our words and actions, measuring them for how they were perceived – that is the fear of man.

If our lives are dominated by measuring ourselves by others, comparing ourselves with other's status in life, their wealth, their lifestyles, their mannerisms; if we are often making mental comparisons between ourselves and others – that is the fear of man.

If we find jealousy and envy in our hearts - that is the fear of man.

When we avoid people, or certain people – that is the fear of man.

When we are afraid of trying new things in case we make a mistake, afraid of how we will look if we make a mistake – that is the fear of man.

If we feel responsible for others, feel the inability to say no - that can be the fear of man.

If we are overcommitted and cannot withdraw from commitments - that can be the fear of man.

When we are afraid of hurting people and refrain from doing what is necessary - that is the fear of man.

When we are extremely responsible, so that we could never turn down a request - that can be the fear of man.

When we boast about ourselves - that is the fear of man.

When we pretend to be less than we know we are - that is the fear of man.

When we deliberately seek to be provocative - that is the fear of man.

When we want to be the clown, the centre of attention, the life of the party, the local comedian - that can be the fear of man.

When we deliberately are non-conformist in our dress, speech, appearance and behaviour so as to shock, surprise, or ‘just be different’ - that is simply another form of the fear of man.

When we find ourselves easily annoyed, irritated with others, when we are more often than not angry with others – that is the fear of man.

When we put on a face, act in a way that will win us favour; when we are situational or social chameleons, blending our ways and manners and speech into whatever our social environment is at the time – that is the fear of man.

When we lie, be it justifying ourselves, blaming, deceiving, manipulating – that is the fear of man.

When we are needy of others, so dependent on them it reaches idolatrous proportions - we are in the grip of the fear of man.

When we are terrified of being harmed by others, timid of going out or seeing people, paralysed by fear of crime – we are under the control of the fear of man.

By now, I think you can see how the fear of man runs deep into all of our souls. Almost every move we make can be tainted by, ‘How will this look? What will people think of me?’”

The fear of man is an important theme throughout Scripture. God knows that if we are to please Him and live Christlike, satisfied lives in Him, we cannot be shackled by the fear of man. And that’s exactly what it is – bondage. The Bible even says this:

“ The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall be safe.” (Pro 29:25)

When man fears other men more than God, it becomes a snare, a trap. Man seeks something from other men, but it ends up ensnaring him in a world of bondage to other men’s opinions and abilities. He seeks to use other men, but they end up controlling him.

Now the interesting thing about Proverbs 29:25 is that it gives us interesting insight into what constitutes the fear of man. Two phrases are laid parallel to each other – the fear of man, which brings a snare, and trusting in the LORD, which brings safety. Hebrew wisdom literature and poetry often makes use of this parallelism – putting two thoughts side by side for repetitive effect, or by means of contrast. Here’s the thing – notice the fear of man is laid parallel to trusting God. In other words the fear of man is really trusting in man and not God. It is choosing to reverence and depend on and look to other men as opposed to God. We do this from birth, since we inherit Adam’s sinful nature. But we continually learn throughout our lives. If not checked, it will grow and become an entrenched part of how we act and think.

Let’s try and break down the process of the fear of man. The first link is selfishness.

Selfishness: Since Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, we are given to regarding and loving ourselves more than anyone else. We regard ourselves as the centre of the universe. We regard everything and everyone else as orbiting around us, there to serve us, there to meet our needs. It is important to state this because one of the impediments to overcoming the fear of man is the wrong thinking that we are these love-needy creatures and our real problem is that people haven’t loved us the way they should have. From this unbiblical view of man, we can proceed to have the

unbiblical victim-mentality. We can blame any number of sins and attitudes on others – it's their fault, they didn't love me the way they were supposed to. They didn't meet my needs for affection and love and attention. This is current psychology – you are always the victim of the product of how you were treated. In this way of thinking, the only way to treat the fear of man, or co-dependency as it is sometimes called is to assert our independence, be more firm, more decisive in our relationships and any number of quick-fix psychojargon techniques.

Sadly, many Christians embrace this philosophy. On the surface, it's a lot easier to take than being told our real problem is selfishness. I'd much rather hear that I am empty, and it's other people's fault, than to hear that I am full of myself, and it's my fault. I'd much rather hear I am deficient in love, and other's failed to provide it than to hear that I am over-supplied in love for myself and don't love others biblically, and its my fault.

Now believing that the real problem in my fear of man is not selfishness but neediness is not simply bad because it is wrong, it is bad because it will leave you in bondage. If you go believing that the real problem is that people do not see you correctly, or treat you right, or meet your needs the way they should, you will be thirsty for joy and peace your whole life. God's prescription for your joy is actually going to come in the form of loving others, not waiting around to be loved. Believing that you are not part of the problem, that you are merely the victim will not help you; it will leave you in darkness. If you will not come to the light of God's Word, you will remain in darkness and stumble around bumping into things. The problem that causes the fear of man is not neediness, it is selfishness. Selfishness in this sense: Because the nature of sin is to forsake the glory of God and seek to find pleasure in ourselves and our own ways, other people are then enlisted to support us in this endeavour. In other words, it's pretty lonely to sing your own praises, so our selfish hearts go looking for some other people to agree with us that we are wonderful. It's not very believable, even to our deceitful hearts that we are the centre of the universe, so we want other humans to assist our belief by acting that way towards us. So we look to humans to enthrone and condone and affirm our selfishness by the various ways we trust them. We trust them to regard us highly, to respect us, to praise us, to protect us, to provide for us, to think we are good people. But in so doing, we enter into the second link of the fear of man, and that is...

Substitution: We give men a place in our lives that is supposed to belong to God. In our attempts to glory in self, we go around looking for worshippers. We do this in many ways – from boasting, to trying to be someone else's saviour. We do this when we cannot say no, and when we are the impossible-to-please customer. We are looking for worshippers, people whom we can use to pay some form of tribute to us. We need people in an unbiblical sense; we come to rely on them in ways that were meant only for our relationship with God. But here is why it is a snare. To do that, we place ourselves in a situation which is the very reverse of what was intended. We were meant to be in a submissive relationship to God, and trusting Him to meet our needs as we glorified Him. Now, we seek others to meet our needs by glorifying us, while we try to use them. But it backfires. Whoever you trust, you must unwittingly submit to. And since we trust other humans, we place them in a place they were never meant to be – that of our god. They control us. That leads to the third link...

Slavery: If we do not repent of our selfishness and our substitution, we will have other people where they should not be – controlling us. And the problem is this – it is one thing to place your trust in a holy, kind and loving God, it is another to place it in humans who themselves are competing for first place in the universe.

The turmoil and conflict of sin is that our sin natures want us to be in the centre. We do not turn to God, so we turn to other humans to affirm that we are in the centre. But they also want to be in the centre, and will fight with us when their selfishness conflicts with the interests of our selfishness. Selfish people only get along when some agreement has been reached of how to make their respective ‘selfishness’s’ co-operate for a time. And to place people in the position of control in our lives is fatal to our joy and peace. There is no possible stability, consistency and satisfaction, if we are seeking glory from other human beings as our satisfaction in life. We are wrong for seeking glory, and we are doubly wrong for seeking it from other glory-seeking humans.

Now there is, of course, a place for trust in other humans. All of us have to trust people and depend on them in some measure to make everyday life, and healthy relationship work. That’s not what we are speaking about. We are speaking about idolatry – where we place another human in a place of honour and control in our lives that belongs to God. That can range from the opinion of the man at the bus-stop, to a demanding need for love from our spouse.

What then is going to be the solution? How do we biblically tackle the fear of man in our lives? Well, we will give a brief overview now, and in succeeding programmes illustrate and apply it practically.

The first key is Repentance. We cannot make progress toward overthrowing the fear of man until we see it as a sin. As long as we see this as ‘unmet felt needs’, or having been hurt or shamed, when there is culpability on our part, we cannot proceed. Now, certainly, man does sin against us. We are sometimes shamed by others. We are victimised. But this is not what we have to repent of. We have to repent of our self-centredness, and our submitting to the idol of other men. For example, someone abused by a relative does not have to repent of having been abused – that was not their sin. But if they did not turn to God for power to forgive and for His covering from shame, and instead allowed hatred or bitterness or fear of that person to dominate their lives, that is something to repent of. We are to realise even when we are sinned against, we often compound the situation with selfish and sinful reactions of our own. We turn further away from God in unbelief, to our own defence mechanisms, to try and preserve our view of self. And wherever it is clear that we have allowed other people to hold a place in our lives where we are controlled by them, we must confess this as a sin to God. We must repent of our self-centredness that sees ourselves as deserving of the love, honour and respect of others, which is often just a respectable front for evil pride that seeks glory.

The truth is, in spite of what modern psychology may say the Bible does not define man as a needy victim, whose psychological needs must be soothed and daubed with acceptance and love by others. It defines man as the victimiser, who harms himself and others in his lustful pursuit of his own glory. It shows the solution not as waiting around for nicer people to treat me better, but to find my joy in glorifying God and

loving others. That sounds foreign to ears that have been saturated with talk of self-esteem, 'felt-needs', loving myself etc. But those terms are foreign to the Bible. The Bible does not command us to love ourselves, it assumes that we do. Most often, it is commanding us to forget about ourselves, to stop loving ourselves so much. This is why the first step is repentance. Repent of my self-centred focus, and the result of giving the place of trust that belonged to God, to other people.

The second step is Reverence. That is, the fear of God. The only thing that displaces the fear of man is the fear of God. We saw that in Proverbs 29:25 when the opposite of the fear of man is defined as trusting the Lord. Trusting the Lord is part of fearing the Lord.

"Ye that fear the LORD, trust in the LORD: he is their help and their shield. "(Psa 115:11)

The fear of the Lord is a sense of awed reverence for the revealed Person of God. Most often, it occurs because of the awesome contrasts in God's character. We see His greatness, and we see His goodness. We see His transcendence, and then we see how He draws near to us. We see His power, and then we see His gentleness. We see His wrath, and we see His mercy. Seeing the awesome contrasts in the infinite nature of God causes the fear of the Lord. While no one can fully define the fear of the Lord, the reaction to the fear of the Lord is a broken humility. There is repentance, deep sorrow, shame and regret for having sinned against such a pure and holy God. There is lowliness – a sense of smallness before such an awesome God. It is like when we see countless stars on a clear night, or when we stand atop a mountain peak. We realise our absolute smallness before such a God, the feeling we experience. There is submission – as we behold such an awesome God; the very Sovereign of the universe, we yield ourselves to Him. No one can resist God, and in that moment of clarity that the fear of the Lord brings, we surrender our will and life to Him, to do His will.

There is also dependence – a helplessness that trustingly looks to such a powerful and strong God for the grace it needs to obey Him and please Him. And then, there is also, a sense of hopeful seeking. The fear of the Lord shows us that He is not only a great God, but a good God too, and we consequently look to Him with trembling joy, with reverent confidence, that He will do us good and not evil.

This brokenness gives rise to Biblical Faith – a repentant, humble, dependent, submissive, desirous embracing of Jesus Christ for all He is. The fear of the Lord then causes biblical humility and faith. This stands in opposition to the fear of man. Notice Christ's words in this regard:

"How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only? (Joh 5:44)

Notice the contrast – those who seek honour from one another cannot believe, because those who believe seek the honour that comes from God alone. The fear of the Lord dislodges the fear of man. Again, hear our Lord speak on this:

"And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Mat 10:28)

The fear of God dislodges the fear of man for a few reasons:

- i) It gets our eyes off ourselves. The root problem of the fear of man is our self-centredness. Now, if you have ever stood at the top of a beautiful mountain range and looked out at the view. Did you at that time think, “How wonderful I am to be standing here! What a clever, good-looking, nice person I am. I think I certainly add much to this scenery”. Now, if you did that, you are vain indeed. Most people are simply so awed by the grandeur as to completely forget about themselves and lose themselves in awe as they stare at the majesty of God’s creation. Their eyes are not on themselves as they see something much bigger, grander and older than themselves. The fear of the Lord will do that as well.
- ii) It is a much larger and more rewarding ‘fear’. The fear of man is a hard master that yields very little in terms of rewards. We have to keep working all our lives to maintain the kind of image we want to have in front of others, and people can be fickle and change their view overnight. The fear of the Lord is a wondrous, awesome experience that deepens us, strengthens us, and fills us with wisdom for life. The fear of the Lord frees us to love people instead of needing them or using them. The fear of man enslaves us to their opinions, words or deeds.
- iii) It places other men in perspective. The Lord Himself puts it very well in Isaiah:

“I, I am he who comforts you; who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass, and have forgotten the LORD, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, and you fear continually all the day because of the wrath of the oppressor, when he sets himself to destroy? And where is the wrath of the oppressor? (Isa 51:12-13)

God says who are you to fear other people, and forget your Creator? Notice, the Lord regards the fear of man not as neediness, but as arrogance. Who are you to think so much of yourself, and so little of Me, that you turn to feeble men for trust and hope and love?

Our goal then is going to be to grow continually in the fear of the Lord, so that His pleasure over us is far more important to us than that of others. Glorifying Him will be the core of our lives; it is here that we find abundant life and joy, not in trying to fill ourselves with more of ourselves.

To grow in the fear of the Lord will involve a number of practical things we can do so that our view of God is bigger than our view of man. We’ll look at these as we go along, but it will include the Bible, prayer, service, evangelism and loving others.

The third thing we will then do to overturn the fear of the Lord will be...

Reflection:

We were created in God's image. The image is marred by sin. When we are saved by receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour, God begins the work of restoring His image in us. It is as if we are mirrors. The work of sanctification is the work of fixing, mending and polishing the mirror until He sees a better and better reflection of Himself. Our lives are meant to be reflection of the Lord Jesus Christ back to God and to others. So our focus is not going to be on trying to get others to be nicer to us. It is going to be on reflecting Christ through the process of sanctification. The Lord Jesus Christ was clearly no man-pleaser. He loved people, but He did not need them. Even His enemies recognised this:

"And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances." (Mat 22:16)

He entered Zachheus' home, even when it caused people to grumble. He allowed a sinful woman to wash his feet with tears, even when Simon the Pharisee was shocked. He spoke with a Samaritan woman, even though it was not done and surprised His disciples. He touched lepers, when that was not done. He healed on the Sabbath in full view of the Pharisees and he denounced them publicly on numerous occasions. He spoke of God as His Father, though people tried to stone Him on more than one occasion. Jesus Christ, our Lord, and our example was not in the grip of the fear of man. Rather, His philosophy was summed up when He said:

"And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him." (Joh 8:29)

As we continually deny ourselves and have our minds renewed by the Word of God, we can increasingly reflect Christ, one who loved and served people, but did seek to please them. He was focused on pleasing God and loving man.

The fear of man can be overcome by repentance, reverence and reflection. What a liberating thing, to be free from needing people in an idolatrous fashion, and be free to please God and serve others. Learning how to do that will be our goal for the next few messages.
