

Overcoming the Crippling Fear of Man – 2

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The fear of man brings a snare. Being captive to the opinions of others, being in bondage to the power of other people, being shackled by fear that others will reject us, despise us, harm us, ridicule us – this is the sinful fear of man that dominates our lives. We began last week to look at the fear of man. We saw the fear of man is actually rooted in selfishness. In a selfish desire to meet our own needs, we substitute the fear of God with trusting men. We look to them to affirm us, help us, protect us, praise us and in so doing we place them in a position of great power and influence. In short, people become idols to us – we need them, instead of being able to love them.

We saw the faulty thinking in much modern psychology is the idea that man is a needy love-cup who must be filled, otherwise he will be dysfunctional. Instead the Biblical view is that man is so full of himself that he harms himself and others in his self-centredness. Therefore, the solution is going to be repentance - repentance of self-centredness and substituting people for God. Then, there must be reverence – the fear of the Lord. The fear of God will displace the fear of man. Then, there must be reflection – reflecting Christ as a God-Pleasing, people-loving servant.

To help us identify and mortify the fear of man, we want to now begin to identify its different facets, and then apply the Biblical antidote.

Edward T Welch, in his book, ‘When People Are Big and God’ is Small, identifies three ways the fear of man manifests itself:

- 1) We fear that people will humiliate us – they will expose us and shame us
- 2) We fear that people will reject, ridicule or despise us
- 3) We fear that people will attack, threaten or harm us.

For our purposes, we’ll look at each of these as the fear of humiliation, the fear of heckling, and the fear of harm. Let’s begin with the first one – the fear of humiliation

This is the fear that people will expose us. It is the fear that somehow, we will be so vulnerable and exposed, thereby shamed by others. The first appearance of this kind of fear of man appeared in the Garden of Eden. We read:

“And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. (Gen 3:6-7)

Here you have the entrance of shame. Suddenly, what Adam and Eve had seen all along felt shameful, and they felt the need to cover themselves. Worrying what each thought of the other now meant more than what God thought of them. And so began mankind’s walk of darkness. In vain attempts to hide our shame, we make fig leaves of our own. We hide from one another. We lie to each other. We pretend. We wear masks and act hypocritically. We blame. We compare. We justify. We change the subject. We avoid each other. We boast. We slander. We flatter. Anything to get the

spotlight off ourselves. We do not want to be revealed, because we feel shame over our sin.

Sometimes, one sign of this fear of man is when we live in fantasy worlds. Fearing man often manifests itself by living in fantasy. When you live in dream worlds, other than of your own making, written or filmed by someone else, you are saying that you prefer this world. This is the world where I can control things. Here I am successful, beautiful, rich, powerful, and popular. Here people accept and praise and adore me. Here I am admired and desired. This usually reflects shame – we do not want to live in the real world and face others with who we are.

Another example of this fear of humiliation is that we seem fine to confess some things to God which we could never confess to man. Now that is not to say that we must confess all our sins to man. But the fact that we feel OK to confess to God but terrified to tell others reveals who is bigger in our lives.

We feel guilty from the word go, our God-given conscience accuses us. Now the world tells us the problem is low self-esteem. Hence, they prescribe any number of things to boost our view of ourselves, and supposedly feel better about ourselves. However, this will not solve anything. The problem that is often called low self-esteem is often shame over sin. It is the same reflex that made Adam and Eve use fig leaves to cover themselves from one another. Our own disobedience to God makes us want to hide ourselves from each other.

Moreover, we then adopt any number of strategies to keep people from getting too close. Not realising, that we are then, enslaved to the fear of man. If we were in the fear of God, the knowledge that His all-seeing eyes have seen and known us from top to bottom, is a far more terrifying thought than the idea that someone might find out all about me and be disgusted, for they too, are sinners. But the thought that the holy God knows me inside out, this ought to cause the fear of God.

Now let's take just a moment to say something about shame. There is a form of shame which is not brought about by our own sin, but by the sins of others done to us. Anyone who has been violated in a sexual way feels intense shame, and yet it is not their fault. What is happening here is that the sin of another intensifies one's own sense of shame for sin. We all have pre-existing shame for sin, but when we are sinned against; it intensifies this feeling to where we feel very shamed and defiled. But even when we have been sinned against, the approach to dealing with the fear of man is much the same.

Now, let's seek to apply the Biblical solution:

Firstly, repentance. We need to identify the selfishness and self-centredness inherent in this fear and turn away from it. The problem here is not the gaze of other humans. It is that we know we have sinned, and refuse to turn to God. Instead, we raise people up to god-status, and try to keep them from knowing our sin and its guilt.

The second solution then is reverence, or the fear of the Lord. We need to grow in the fear of the Lord, so it displaces the fear of man in this situation. What is it about God that will displace this fear of other people humiliating us? The first thing is to know

that God is all-seeing. There is nothing about us that He does not already know. Our worst sin, our most shameful act, our most defiling moment – He saw it and knew it.

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. (Psa 139:1-4)

The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good. (Pro 15:3)

For the ways of man are before the eyes of the LORD, and he pondereth all his goings. (Pro 5:21)

This thought is both liberating and terrifying. Terrifying, because if there is one Person in the universe that you don't want to know you sin – it is the Thrice-Holy God. If you are going to hide your sin, at all costs – hide it from Him! But then, what is liberating is the thought that you cannot hide it from Him. He knows it, and, instead of destroying us on the spot, has made mercy available in the form of Jesus Christ - dying and rising again on the cross. I do not have to hide my sins away from Him, because He has made provision for me.

It is interesting – nakedness is associated with the feeling of shame. The antidote to that nakedness is covering. In the same way, the antidote for the shame we feel over sin is a covering – the covering that Christ provides in His shed blood in the cross. Just like God clothed Adam and Eve with skins to replace their fig leaves, so our vain efforts to cover our shame over sin must be replaced by satisfaction in the atonement of Jesus Christ.

"I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." (Isa 61:10)

"Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. (Isa 54:4-5)

As we meditate on the great and awesome God knowing all about our sin, but then completely accepting us in Jesus Christ, it produces great peace. After all, what is the opinion of a fellow sinner to matter, if the verdict of the Most Holy God is that we are justified, forgiven and cleansed in Christ?

The third reaction then is to reflect Christ.

This is especially important since one important way to understand that Christ's righteousness has been imputed to us, is to seek to reproduce that by the power of the Spirit. The New Testament places great value on the power of a clean conscience.

For our boast is this the testimony of our conscience that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. (2Co 1:12)

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. (1Ti 1:5)

let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb 10:22)

When we are seeking to reproduce Christ in our lives in dependence on the Holy Spirit, we will have a good conscience. But it is turning back to sin, that defiles our conscience, and can produce shame based on sin, which, if not immediately confessed to God, can become fuel for the fear of man.

Let's look at the second kind of fear of man – the fear that man will reject or despise me, that people will heckle me, insult me or ridicule me. This fear is almost universal, and expresses itself in many shapes and forms. We see it in the Bible many times as well. One example is King Saul, who was often given over to doing what was expedient or disobedient, because he wanted the approval of people. Another example is that God warned judges against being partial or showing favouritism – another form of the fear of man. The apostle Peter is probably our clearest example. The night of Jesus' betrayal, what were his three denials but a fear of man – a fear of rejection, ridicule?

Fearing rejection comes in many forms. But each of them reflects that we have made other people into idols. We believe they have power to give us something. We believe they have power to bless us. But at the same time, we want to use them and manipulate them so as to give us the things we want. Unfortunately, the idol of man becomes bigger and bigger and eventually rules us. It tells us how to think, what to say, what to wear, what to feel, when to laugh. The whole thing backfires, and the people we tried to use to meet our desires become our masters.

The process of selfishness, substitution and slavery is in effect again. So once again, the biblical solution is going to be repentance, reverence and reflection.

It takes some Spirit-controlled self-examination to recognise that our fear of man in this area is not weakness, but self-centredness. Even when it takes the form of self-pity, or shyness, or timidity, or avoiding people – it still comes from a heart that loves itself more than others. But as we see it, we must repent of looking to man as our source of satisfaction. We must repent of treasuring the opinions of man more than that of God. We must see it as sinful to so love ourselves, that we seek others to affirm this by treating us as if we are the centre as well. We must recognise our giving in to social pressure, to laugh at dirty jokes, to engage in things we ought not to as selfishness that would rather sin than be despised. We must recognise our excessive competitiveness as wanting to be seen as better than others, so that we would be admired. We must see our envy as a sign of desiring the praise of man for better things. We must see our embarrassment in front of crowds as the fear of man dominating us. We must see our excessive desire to please others by never saying no, by taking unnecessary responsibility for other's lives, is a desire to please ourselves using others. We want to be known as a saviour, as a wonderfully kind and merciful person. We must see our inability to say no, to withdraw for fear of hurting others is

not so much a love for others as it is a love of ourselves, not wanting to appear or be known as someone who hurts others. We must see our anxiety over how people see us, or what they think of us as an unbiblical idolising of man. We must see our changing act – where we change our behaviour depending on who we are with, as the fear of man, loving the approval of others so much that we wear different faces for different people.

But as we identify it, the first step is repentance. We must see that loving ourselves and using the approval of others to this end is sinful. Life does not revolve around me, and using people to try and prove that to myself is idolatrous, and will enslave me. We need to see it as sinful that the opinions of men loom larger to us than the approval of God. We must repent of the fact that we will sin sooner than be rejected by men. We must repent of worshipping men, and rejecting God.

Then, we must turn to God in reverence. The fear of the Lord must dislodge the fear of man. Just like the fact that God knows us and has covered us dislodges the fear of humiliation, so certain facts about God will dislodge the fear of rejection.

- i) God is our Judge – only His opinion counts ultimately. It's funny how we often betray the fact that we both know this, but at the same time don't believe it. We crave the approval of man, and when it doesn't come, we say things like, "Well, who cares about them? What does their opinion matter?" In this, we reflect that we know the opinion of man is worth only so much. But we are inconsistent because we still seek after favourable opinions from men. What we are to see is that God is final Judge. He will give a final opinion on us. He will give acceptance or rejection, praise or disapproval, love or contempt.

"...For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us will give an account of himself to God." (Rom 14:10-12)

- ii) God has accepted us in Christ and loves us:

"To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. (Eph 1:6)

If there is anyone whose opinion matters, it is God's. And if we have received Christ by faith, then God's opinion of us is very high indeed. Not because of our merit, but because of Christ's. When God looks at a believer in Christ, He sees His Son's righteousness. He sees His Son's purity and holiness, and He is pleased.

"Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1Co 4:5)

An amazing verse which tells us that believers will receive a commendation from God, God will praise His servant. We see this in Christ's parables, where faithful

stewards received the commendation, *“Well done, you good and faithful servant. Enter in to the joy of your lord”*.

If I am sure of God’s approval of me in Christ, then that dislodges the sinful craving for approval and praise from other men. I am satisfied in all that Christ is to me and for me. I am complete in Him, and do not need the praise of man to supplement what God says of me in Him.

iii) The third way we overturn the fear of man is by reflecting Christ. In this area of reflecting Christ, we find that Jesus did not seek the praise of man. Indeed, it was His God-centred focus that refused to compromise with man, which refused to give in to the praise of man, which brought down the fury of the Pharisees who saw to it that He was arrested.

Jesus summed up His ministry when He said, *“I do always the things that please Him”*. Jesus was so God-centred that at all times, He was seeking to be pleasing to His Father. Herein lay His great courage, which we are to imitate – He sought to please God, and serve man. The reverse of this, which is the fear of man, is to please self and use man. We are liberated from the tyranny of pleasing man, when we see our first priority is to please God, and our second priority is to love man. We love people in these categories: our brothers and sisters in Christ, followed by our unsaved neighbour, those we come into contact with who are not saved, and then also our enemies. In each case, we seek to love them. We do not seek to use them to support our self-centredness. We reflect Christ by being a servant, someone who seeks the good of others at his own expense.

“But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed--God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.” (1Th 2:4-6)

As we seek to serve people, we might ask, but what about our needs? Won’t we get stepped on and neglected if we just serve others? If that were the case, then God would not command it. God knows that our true spiritual needs are met in pleasing Him and serving others. As we do this, we are liberated from needing their approval, as our focus is entirely off self; it is now on God and on others.

Next week, we will examine the fear of being harmed by others.