

## **Cultivating the Fear of the Lord**

A.W. Tozer said, "The fear of God is... astonished reverence. I believe that the reverential fear of God mixed with love and fascination and astonishment and admiration and devotion is the most enjoyable state and the most satisfying emotion the human soul can know."

He went on to write these scathing, but I think accurate, words: "The God of the modern evangelical rarely astonishes anybody. He manages to stay pretty much within the constitution. Never breaks our bylaws. He's a very well- behaved God and very denominational and very much one of us, and we ask Him to help us when we're in trouble and look to Him to watch over us when we're asleep. The God of the modern evangelical isn't a God I could have much respect for. But when the Holy Ghost shows us God as He is we admire Him to the point of wonder and delight."

Why is it the case that so many modern Christians might talk about the fear of the Lord, and agree that we should have the fear of the Lord, but seem to experience so little of it? Why, if all we've seen about the fear of the Lord as a grace, as a gift of knowing His greatness and goodness is true, why don't more Christians have it?

Some of the answer is what I call the phenomenon of the two-way street in the Christian life. The Christian life has a number of things that work in two directions. A leads to B, but B also leads to A. For example, Jesus told us that if we love Him we will keep His commandments. Love leads to obedience. But He also told us, if we keep His commandments, we will then abide in His love. That is, obedience leads to love.

Paul prays in Colossians that if we get knowledge of God's will, we will walk in a worthy way. But in Ephesians he tells us that if we walk in the light, we will then find out what pleases God, what the will of God is.

You find this two-way street, or this feedback loop throughout the Christian life. But because many Christians don't understand it, they are often standing around waiting for some bus to come and collect them and whisk them down the street. They think these Christian realities happen in one direction, and when it doesn't, they give up, or do nothing, or stand around perplexed. They know that zeal for God will lead to spiritual discipline, but they don't see that spiritual discipline will lead to zeal for God. So they stand around waiting for zeal to sweep them into spiritual discipline, and when it doesn't, they do nothing. It never occurs to them to start being spiritual disciplined to see if zeal might result.

The fear of the Lord very much fits into this category of a two way street. As we've seen, the fear of the Lord is not something you manufacture, or conjure up. You can't fake it, or will it to be. We have seen from Hebrews that it is a result of grace: the grace of a new heart, and the grace of being exposed to God's glory in the Scriptures: regeneration and revelation. Without the gospel of forgiveness, no one comes to rightly fear God. Without real exposure to who God is in the Bible, no one will properly understand God's greatness and goodness.

But once that is in place, the fear of the Lord is one of those two-way streets. If you have a new heart, and you have the Scriptures, you cannot simply face one way and hope that the fear of the Lord will come upon you like an afternoon thunderstorm, or pick you up and carry you like a wave. You have a responsibility to cultivate the fear of the Lord.

We see this in Scriptures that tell us the fear of the Lord can be learnt, as it says five times in Deuteronomy, or that I can be taught, as it says in psalm 34, or that it can be chosen, as it says in Proverbs 1. At least twelve times it is given as a command to perform. So while the fear of the Lord

is a response to who God is, it is also a posture that you adopt, an attitude you cultivate. When you do so, the two graces we saw last week flow all the more strongly.

The one direction of the street called the fear of the Lord is grace. But the other direction is humility and faith. If, instead of humility and faith, there is pride, laziness, sloppiness, casualness, pretty soon it begins to obstruct even the other side of the road. The fear of the Lord is received, but once received, it has to be cultivated.

Today we want to consider from the Scriptures four actions of those who cultivate the fear of the Lord. These four actions are deliberate attitudes and actions we take. They are still empowered by grace; they still begin and end in the working of the Holy Spirit, but they are nevertheless responses you and I must have.

## I. Reverence The Bible as the Voice of God

For all those *things* My hand has made, And all those *things* exist," Says the LORD. "But on this *one* will I look: On *him who is* poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word. (Isa. 66:2 )

In context, Isaiah is giving God's prophecies about the future new heavens and new earth with a new temple. But here the Lord makes a simple statement, God's favour, God's grace is on the humble (poor and contrite), the one who **trembles** at My Word. That's a fascinating statement. Usually we associate the idea of trembling with encountering God or the glory of God. But here God commends the one who trembles at His Word. Consider the unbreakable link between God and His Word. They are so closely associated that the way you treat the one is really the way you treat the other. If you love and fear God, you will love and fear His Word. If you love and fear His Word, you will love and fear God. Proverbs 13:13 puts it this way: He who despises the word will be destroyed, But he who fears the commandment will be rewarded.

If the Bible truly represents God's Message, God's voice written down in words, then how you treat the Word is exactly how you are treating God's name, God's nature, God's person. Remember the words of Charles Spurgeon, "If we want revivals, we must revive our reverence for the Word of God."

Sometimes, worshippers have shown this by how they treat the physical object, the book or the scroll that contains God's Word. In the synagogue, whenever the Torah scroll is opened to be read it is laid on a piece of cloth called the *mappah*. When it is carried through the synagogue, the members of the congregation may touch the edge of their prayer shawl (*tallit*) to the Torah scroll and then kiss it as a sign of respect. In some of the Puritan churches, a large pulpit Bible would be brought into the church and carried down the aisle, while the parishioners would stand in respect.

Those actions show respect for the object, but we all understand that we are not venerating the object, we are supposed to venerate the words contained be it in a scroll, a book, or a cell-phone screen. What does that look like to venerate or reverence the Word?

Reverence for the Word looks like a special kind of attention when you read it, or it is read to you or preached to you. When God speaks, you don't tune Him out, or let your mind wander. God is the one voice that you put everything else down, you stop scrolling on your phone, you stop doing other things and you focus on Him.

Reverence for the Word looks like a special kind of concentration to try to focus, understand, and remember it. What God says is something you should find essential to understand. Proverbs 2

describes the heart of reverence for the Word:

**Proverbs 2:1** My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you, <sup>2</sup> So that you incline your ear to wisdom, *And* apply your heart to understanding; <sup>3</sup> Yes, if you cry out for discernment, *And* lift up your voice for understanding, <sup>4</sup> If you seek her as silver, And search for her as *for* hidden treasures; <sup>5</sup> Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God. (Prov. 2:1-5)

Do you stop before you read it, or before you come to hear it preached, and say, “This is no ordinary reading material. This is not social media gossip, or looking up recipes or health and fitness articles or new stories. This is not just more information. This is a message from God.”?

Do you pray that the One who gave it will give you the understanding to unlock it? It is living and powerful.

The classical scholar Dr. E. V. Rieu had translated Homer into modern English for the prestigious Penguin Classics. He was sixty years old, had been an agnostic his whole life, and then Penguin Publishing invited him to translate the Gospels. He did so, and he later said, “It changed me. My work changed me. And I came to the conclusion...that these works bear the seal of the Son of Man and God.” God's Words.

If the Ark of the Covenant were discovered, and inside were found intact the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, and there written on them were the Ten Commandments, not written with a human hand, but by God Himself, would you venerate that more than the book in your hand? I think many of us would, because of our tendency to attach power to objects. But God wants us to attach reverence not to objects but to words, His Words, and the words printed in ink or displayed in pixels are every much His Word than if you were looking at the preserved Ten Commandments in a museum.

If your Bible lies unopened every day of the week outside Sunday, then you don't tremble at His Word. If you can come to church, and pretend to look at your Bible on your phone, while actually looking at other things, you don't tremble at His Word. If you can sleep and daydream and doodle, then there is some other voice that gets your attention, but it is not God's. If you let your children who are old enough to read, sleep and slouch and scribble and doodle before God's Word, then you're reinforcing that in them.

But if you wish to cultivate the fear of the Lord, then teach yourself and those you love to sit up straight and hear, to treat God's Word like no other book, to give it unusual attention, unusual study, careful memorisation. You do what Paul said the Thessalonians did: “you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed *it* not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. (1 Thess. 2:13)

## **II. Reverence the Commandments as Obedience to God**

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; (Phil. 2:12 )

Paul tells the Philippians that they should work out their salvation, which means to flesh out the internal realities, become in practice what they are in position. He says to do it in fear and trembling. That means, with carefulness, respect, caution, seriousness, as if disobedience was dangerous, and obedience was essential. Paul says, be disciplined and focused on your obedience.

The Bible describes people who fear the Lord as those who obey Him. They are aware of His

presence, aware of His holiness, aware of His judgements and His mercy. But the street also runs the other way. People who become disciplined and diligent about obeying God by grace, grow in the fear of the Lord. To put it another way, you reverence obeying God. It becomes special, essential, needful to you, to obey God in every way in everything.

There is nothing legalistic, or contrary to grace, to become methodical and deliberate about obeying everything God tells you. To become disciplined about pleasing God in every area of your life is to grow in the fear of the Lord. We see orthodox Jews claiming to keep 613 commandments of the Law (at least the ones they can without a Temple). Very often they're obeying man-made additions to the Law, not the Law itself. But a lot of Christians could do with that kind of methodical interest in obedience. Out of interest, do you know how many New Testament commands there are? Someone has counted 1050. Counting doesn't mean you're obeying, but it at least shows you're concerned to know the full extent of what it is to please God.

Or to put it another way, have you ever mined the Scriptures for everything it commands on a certain topic: everything Scripture says about parenting, or your speech, or your money, or your sexuality, or church life? That's becoming disciplined and methodical about obeying God. It's reverencing your obedience as the act of pleasing God.

Here's what I have seen when a Christian gets a hold of this. He starts to realise that he has been really general and vague in his obedience. He has been using the words “under grace” as an excuse to remain perpetually ignorant about God's demands, because at the back of his mind he knows that if he studies God's commands, it increases his culpability. But one day, he repents of that kind of spiritual laziness, and goes on a hunt to find out exactly what pleases God in a certain area, by searching out the Scriptures, and memorising, and then seeking to obey by grace, confessing his failures, but seeking real, measurable change. The result is a mini-revival in his life. The Bible starts to open up in new and unexpected ways. Worship seems sweeter. Prayer comes alive. What has happened? He started cultivating the fear of the Lord by asking at all times, and in all ways, what would please the Lord here? What area of my life needs serious work?

Paul says to Timothy: exercise yourself toward godliness. <sup>8</sup> For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come. (1 Tim. 4:7-8)

The word there for exercise is *gumnaze*, which means to put on your exercise clothes and train. Training means keeping track of your time spent in exercise, what you're eating, watching for improvements in your heart rate or times or strength or muscle gain or fat burn, or skill.

If your approach to godliness is that it will grow on you spontaneously, then you are being inconsistent, because you have not taken that approach with your finances, your business, your studies, your exams, your sport, your health. Whether it is laziness, or quiet indifference, or carelessness, it works against the fear of the Lord in your life.

You want to experience the fear of the Lord, start making some lists, areas you want to grow in, problem areas that need change, sins that need to be defeated. Start tracking your progress. Find those books that help summarise the biblical data. Become as deliberate about pleasing the Lord as you are in any other area. Reverence for the Bible, goes hand-in-hand with reverence for obedience.

### **III. Reverence Corporate Worship as Meeting With God**

“You shall keep My Sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary: I *am* the LORD. (Lev. 19:30 )

God commands the Israelites to treat God's special days as unique days, and to treat the Tabernacle, and later the Temple with special respect. Israel had a weekly Sabbath, but several other Sabbaths: Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost, Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of Booths. And the Tabernacle and later Temple was where Israelites had to go to present their offerings, to obtain ritual purity, when there was a birth, and for many other events.

After Messiah Jesus has come, we don't have a Temple, because He is the ultimate Temple, and we corporately make up a Temple of living stones. We don't have Sabbaths, because He Himself is our rest, our Passover, or Atonement. But we are commanded to assemble. We do set aside the day of Christ's resurrection as the Lord's Day. And because we gather, we set aside a time, and a place to do so. When we do this, we consecrate them, meaning we separate them from normal days and normal places, to treat them with special respect. When we come to worship our God together, there are things we do that communicate to God, and to ourselves, and to each other, that this moment, and the meaning of this moment is special.

What sort of things? The way we comport ourselves. We try to be punctual. We pay special attention. We even adjust our posture, so it doesn't seem like we're watching a TV show on the couch. We try to teach our children that this moment is special. They don't have to understand everything going on, but they can know it is a serious, special moment. If you took them to the Supreme Court, or to a funeral, or to a special speech by the President, you'd teach them that. You might even make them wear something that tells them, and others that this is a special moment. You'd teach them the importance of silence, of paying attention.

In the place itself, if it was in our power, we'd make that place a combination of beauty and seriousness, the colours, the materials, the layout would say: this is important, this is serious, but also joyful. Come, enjoy, focus.

And then those responsible for leading worship must do their utmost to make sure that worship is a mixture of God's greatness and goodness, that there is trembling joy, awe and gladness. That comes as they choose the Scriptures, and the way they are read. It comes from the songs and hymns that are chosen, and the music that is chosen, and how it is sung and played. It comes from the prayers and the preaching, what is said, and how it is said.

You see, some Christians think that because New Testament Christians don't have a Temple, and because we are now to consecrate our entire lives, that there can be no such thing as holy places or moments. Well, it's true that our whole lives are now holy, but if you're not careful with that teaching, it ends up meaning that because everything is holy, then nothing is holy. Everything, including worship, becomes casual. If that were true, then there could be no special Lord's Supper, because every supper is holy. No, we can still consecrate moments and places and days, while understanding that in the new covenant, God's presence is in our bodies because of Christ.

If you remember the leaders in Malachi who brought diseased and lame sheep to the Temple? How do you think their irreverence affected their worship? Do you think their sloppy, lazy, lethargic attitude increased or decreased their fear of the Lord? Come to church infrequently, late, lazily, casually, and see what happens to your fear of the Lord. Come only when it is convenient and skip when it is difficult, and see what happens. Sleep, wander in and out when it fancies you to do so, don't sing, don't listen carefully, don't pray, don't follow the Scriptures, and see what happens to your fear of the Lord. Attend a church where the focus is on making God familiar, easy, accessible, fun, entertaining, amusing, and see what happens to your fear of the Lord.

I remember what happened in my own life, when I was about 15. I had been a sometime Sunday church attendee, fooling myself that I had my private, healthy Christianity. But I remember a message at a youth camp that got a hold of my heart, and I decided to make a simple change: I would reverence God's church by being there whenever they met. And soon after that I made another simple change: I was going to stop looking like a slob when I went, and I was going to be there early. For me, that was a mini-revival that began to change the course of my entire life.

Unless you reverence corporate worship, you will feel no reverence outside of it. Reverence the place and time of corporate worship, and you may find the fear of the Lord growing all round.

#### IV. Reverence Your Life as An Offering to God

Happy is the man who is always reverent, But he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity. (Prov. 28:14 )

Here Scripture commends the person who is always reverent. The world thinks there is a contradiction between being reverent and being happy, between being serious and being joyful. But here we read that the person who is always reverent, who has a sober frame of mind is happy and blessed and joyful.

Actually Paul, commands this of all people in Titus.

<sup>2</sup> that the older men be **sober, reverent**, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience;

<sup>3</sup> the older women likewise, that they be **reverent** in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things--

<sup>4</sup> that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children,

<sup>5</sup> *to be discreet[sensible]*, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.

<sup>6</sup> Likewise exhort the young men to be **sober-minded**,

<sup>7</sup> in all things showing yourself *to be* a pattern of good works; in doctrine *showing* integrity, **reverence**, incorruptibility, (Tit. 2:7) (Tit. 2:2-7)

Paul wants the men, the women, the young women, the young men, and Titus himself to be sober and reverent.

Notice, the command is to be sober, not sombre. Sombre means gloomy, melancholy, depressed, despondent. Sober means serious-minded, clear-thinking, respectful, approaching life with the appropriate thoughtfulness, sincerity, earnestness and seriousness. It includes the idea of being dignified enough to command respect, not a clown.

We are to be serious-minded, sober, reverent in all of life. Why? Because our lives are an offering to God. That's why God calls on us to have this all day long.

Do not let your heart envy sinners, But *be zealous* for the fear of the LORD all the day; (Prov. 23:17 )

conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay *here* in fear; (1 Pet. 1:17)

The opposite of this is to be flippant and foolish. This is someone who tries to avoid the seriousness of life by turning to endless amusements, entertainments, jokes and trivialities. If your whole life is about amusement, you cannot be a serious person.

In fact, as Proverbs describes sinners, it puts them in ascending categories of wickedness: first the naïve, then the fool, and then worst of all, the scoffer. The mocker or scoffer, who scorns everything, and makes a joke of all things, who is ever amused at everything, the Bible calls him the

worst of sinners. Why? Because the scoffer no longer sees anything worth revering, worth being in awe of. All things are to be taken lightly, or scorned, or insulted.

When you reach this place, you are losing the ability to worship, because there is no longer wonder, amazement, awe. Life become blah, because everything is boring. In your pursuit of endless amusement and distraction you become shallower and shallower and emptier and emptier.

God wants us to recognise that our lives are offerings to God. Our lives are lent to us; they are a stewardship, God's investment of time and money into us. This means you take your life and your purpose seriously. You are meant to live for eternity. You are meant to care for souls, and to care for people's eternal destiny, not just what you're going to wear on Monday or your next holiday.

To be a reverent person is to take seriously what God takes seriously. Souls, the gospel, the church, eternity.

You should take ministry seriously. Sharing the gospel, making disciples, sending missionaries, seeing churches established. This should be front and centre in your life, something you are earnest about.

You should take your calling seriously. Your calling in the home, your calling at work, your calling in the church. Carrying out your roles, your job, your responsibilities should not be something you dismiss and scoff, but something you revere. Why? Because your life is an offering to God.

You're meant to take authority seriously, in the home, in the church, in society, because it is from God. Serious people take authority very seriously. Flippant people scoff at all of it, and pretty soon, feel God's authority very lightly. As Peter says, <sup>17</sup> Honor all *people*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1 Pet. 2:17) Reverence authority. Why? Because your life is an offering to God.

In fact, you should even take your recreation seriously. Your hobbies, your sport, what you listen to and watch during leisure time. Yes, that is the time to unwind, but even there, ask yourself, is the quality and quantity of my leisure making me the opposite of sober and serious-minded? Is it making me trivial and lazy, passive and dependent on silly amusements?

This is how you can be reverent always, seeing your home, job, church, recreation as an offering to God, to be taken seriously.

Many Christians want the fear of the Lord, but they are not cultivating it. Some are standing on the one side of the road, waiting for grace to sweep them up and zap them with the fear of the Lord, but doing nothing about cultivating the fear of the Lord. Some are actually obstructing the flow of grace with irreverence, bringing their blind and torn lambs to God, not understanding that spiritual laziness, indifference, apathy, lethargy kills the fear of the Lord.

To truly gain a right view of God's greatness and goodness, we need grace: the grace of regeneration and the grace of revelation. But then we need to labour hard to cultivate the fear of the Lord.

Reverence the Bible as the voice of God, the way you read it, hear it, study it, learn it, seek it. Reverence obedience as pleasing God, as your way of demonstrating love and allegiance to God. Reverence corporate worship as a set-apart meeting with God in how and when and the way you attend.

Reverence your life as an offering to God in your home and job and recreation and overall attitude. This is how the street of the fear of the Lord will have two directional movement: the movement of

grace from God to us, and the movement of faith from us to God. That's how we might grow in what Tozer called astonished reverence.