

March 4, 2007
 The Fear of the Lord IS Wisdom
 Proverbs 8:12-36 / Job 27:1 – 28:28

Growing up I often heard people say: "A picture is worth a thousand words." I tend to agree. It not only says a lot to the people who look at it, it also says a lot (and maybe even moreso) about the person who painted it!

The same would be true if I could just get inside your head, dig down into your heart, and get a truthful, honest, accurate answer to the following question:

Do you (in your inner heart of hearts) really and truly "fear God"?

Because if I could just learn that one thing — it would tell me an immense amount of things about you — a lot more than I already know — maybe even a lot more than some would WANT me to know!

I would know, for instance, if you are **WISE**, by biblical standards, for over and over again in Scripture we are told that, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 3:7 and 9:10), "The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom" (Prov. 15:33), or as Job puts it today, "The fear of the Lord IS wisdom." You can't be WISE (biblically speaking) if you don't fear God, for only the fool does not fear God.

I would know if you **HATE EVIL**, for as Solomon tells us, "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil" (Prov. 8:13), and that you not only hate evil, but that in your life you also seek to shun it at all times. For Solomon also tells us, "Through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil." He doesn't just abhor it, he refuses to participate in it or have anything to do with it!

If you fear God I would also know that you earnestly seek to **OBEY** all God's commands (Exodus 20:20 / Eccles. 12:13); that you are **TEACHABLE** in the things of God, and that you are willing to **ACCEPT CORRECTION** from Him (Psalm 111:10 / Zeph. 3:7).

I would know that you're **NOT AFRAID** of much other than God, for the one who truly fears God, fears little else. "Do not fear those who can kill the body," says Jesus to His disciples, "but rather fear Him who can cast body and soul into hell" (and He's not talking about Satan)! Or if I may paraphrase it, "Fear God and you NEED NOT fear anything, or anyone, else."

You would have a quiet confidence, peaceful assurance, and restfulness of spirit in the face of persecution, danger or death.

Have I described you? Can you still say you "fear God"?

I would also know some other things about you, for the Bible says:

"God honors those who fear Him" / "He confides in those who fear Him" / "He will bless those who fear Him" / "His great love rests upon those who fear Him" "His goodness is stored up for those who fear Him" / "He provides for those who fear Him" / "He fulfills the desires of those who fear Him" / "His mercy extends to those who fear Him" and "He delights in those who fear Him." (Ps. 15:4 / 25:14 / 31:19 / 103:11 / 111:5 / 115:13 / 145:19 / 147:11) "The fear of the Lord adds length to life," and brings wealth, says Solomon.

In light of all those blessings, you would think that people (and especially the people of God) would be demanding that pastors instruct them in what it means to "fear the Lord," so that they can do so and thus reap such coveted blessings!

It's one of the reasons Moses tells the Israelites: "Learn to fear the Lord your God." Learn to fear Him "all the days of your life" (Deut. 31:12-13). And Solomon puts it even more strongly: "Always be zealous for the fear of the Lord" (Prov. 23:17).

Even Isaiah (summing up the key to the riches of God) says in chapter 33 verse 6:

"The LORD will be the sure foundation of your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge—the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure."

And it just keeps on going! the reason King Uzziah took the throne at the age of 16 and reigned for 52 years as one of Israel's most godly and successful kings. And Ezra tells us in II Chron. 26:5 why he had such political and spiritual success. Because when he was tender and impressionable and his heart was still moldable, "He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God."

Have YOU (like Uzziah) sought out someone to do that for you — instruct you in the fear of God? So many of the blessings of God are promised to those who "fear Him." Do you? Have YOU been schooled in the fear of God? Do you even know what it means?

If you don't, I hope to correct that today. And I want to do it because there's nothing I'd like to see more than for YOU to receive many of the blessings I DID NOT, because unlike Uzziah, I in my formative years and well into my 20's did NOT fear God. And it's not because I wasn't taught to. It's that I chose the pleasures of sin over the rewards of fearing Him. Something I now deeply regret.

And let me say this to you young people in particular: Don't make the same mistake I did. Choose the fear of God as the guiding principle of your life. Hear Moses when he says, "learn to fear Him all the days of your life." Do it, and the abundant blessings that Scripture promises will come your way.

The fear of God is the KEY to the treasures of salvation, wisdom, knowledge, wealth, and length of days. It dispels fear, and brings confidence, assurance, and rest to the soul. How could anyone NOT WANT to have such a "KEY" in their possession?

So, if all those blessings come to those who "fear God," what does it mean, and how do we attain it?

And **FIRST**, let me tell you what it means by pointing out what it does NOT mean. And to do so I have to distinguish between the fear of the Lord justified believers are to have and the fear of the Lord non-believers are to have, because they are very different in nature.

The **BELIEVER** has been twice born (or born again), is justified, adopted into the family of God, has God as his or her Father (in the intimate, caring, relational sense which is not true of the once born unbeliever).

They have been reconciled to God, are at peace with God, stand in grace, and are fully acceptable to God and pleasing to God. He takes great delight in them—His blood purchased children—His adopted sons and daughters, who are heirs to all the spiritual blessings in the heavenly realms! Which means the BELIEVER fears God in a different way than the unbeliever.

The **UNBELIEVER**, knowing God's holiness yet having their sins un-atoned for, dreads even the thought of standing before God in the judgment. (If they don't, it's only because they have no clue what God is really like.)

Unbelievers SHOULD "fear God." The frightful contemplation of being punished for their sins should illicit a sense of terrified dread, for God will (as Scripture tells us) exercise the power He has to "cast them, body and soul, into hell" if they refuse to repent and embrace by faith the gracious reconciliation offered to all in Christ.

The Gospel, as both Isaiah and Jesus and Paul all remind us, is not simply the offer of grace—it is the offer of grace to all people now, in the light of the fact that the Day of Judgment is coming. Jesus, as Paul continually reminds us, saves us from the wrath that will come upon all who dwell on the earth.

If unbelievers DON'T fear that, they're in a worse place than the ones who do, because that fear is one of the things God uses to bring people to Himself. The sinner who doesn't fear God's promise of wrath against their sin will have a rude awakening when he is raised on the Day of Judgment to "meet his Maker" who will come upon him and his sin like a consuming fire, as the Author of Hebrews tells us.

It won't be a pretty sight, and only the fool would not dread its approach knowing God is Holy, and the benefits of the atonement have not been applied to their stead by faith in the blood of Jesus!

The **BELIEVER** (on the other hand) even though reconciled to God, and standing in a state of grace, must still retain and continue to nurture a healthy fear of God.

They are not to "fear Him" in the sense of expecting to be subjected to His wrath on the Day of Judgment. Christ has "saved us from the wrath to come," and thus we are no longer to fear that (Praise God)! That's what John means when he says to believers, "There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment."

But that DOESN'T mean we can therefore be flippant, irreverent, entertain sin or indulge in sin. For to do so is to trample underfoot the grace of God / engage in things God forbids / and thus risk subjecting ourselves to the discipline our loving God promises to exercise upon His children when they are wayward or disobey.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. What the fear of God looks like in the life of a believer.

And to do so there's probably no better verse than Amos 3:2 where God tells the wayward Israelites (much to their dismay!): "You only have I chosen out of all the families on the earth, therefore I will punish you for your sins."

They thought God's "grace" and "special electing love for them" meant they no longer needed to fear Him at all. That because they were saved, they could therefore do anything they wanted to — including sin!

They thought that “standing in a state of grace” meant God would be permissive and turn a blind eye to their sin (like many people today who also erroneously think grace = the promise that God will be permissive).

Not at all says Amos! God’s grace to you actually makes you MORE susceptible to His divine discipline — because now He has brought you into His family / and has become your Loving Father / and His love for you actually causes Him to discipline you more than those who have not been adopted, by grace, into His family.

A father may overlook the drunkenness of a teen who is not his own, and do nothing to discipline the child who is not his own. But it is a miserable father indeed who sees it in his own son or daughter, knows the damage it can do to them if not remedied, and then does nothing to address it or seek to stop it.

“God hates iniquity,” says Tozer, “as a mother hates the polio that [threatens] to take the life of her child.” That’s why a loving God will always hate and do all He can to turn His people from sin. Because sin is a disease that destroys, and cripples, and leads to the death of those whom God wants to see healthy, holy and pure!

Again Tozer puts it so well when he writes this:

“What are Christians to do? We must... hide our un-holiness in the wounds of Christ as Moses hid himself in the cleft of the rock while the glory of God passed by (the God whom no man can see and live). We must take refuge from God in God. Above all we must believe that God sees us as perfect in His Son while He disciplines and chastens and purges us that we may be partakers of His holiness.”

The “fear of God” which the believer is to have and nurture “all the days of his life” is the fear spawned by love which hates to displease its lover. / It is the fear of doing something we know our God and Father hates.

It is the fear of trampling underfoot his grace to us, and subjecting Christ (by our attitudes, words or actions) to public disgrace. / It is a fear that reverences His holiness, stands in awe of his majesty, adores Him for His mercy, and rightfully afraid to stray from the cross.

A healthy fear that leads to life, joy, wisdom, understanding, the fulfillment of our desires, godliness, blessing, wealth, confidence, lack of fear and length of days! How could one not want it?

Then **LAST**, Job tells us that the fear of the Lord not only brings wisdom or IS wisdom, but also brings a determination to shun evil which IS understanding.

And here again I want to speak to you young people (because hopefully the older people already know from personal experience what I'm about to say in reference to shunning evil or sin).

When I was a teenager I didn't see sin as such a big problem (in part because I didn't see sin as evil like the Bible does). I had this "graduated scale of wrong" — where there was sin, then there was evil, and then at the top was just plain wickedness.

SIN (in my mind) consisted of those lesser transgressions like smoking, and getting drunk, breaking into houses just to look around (for curiosity's sake), trying marijuana, being promiscuous, and so forth. They were like the "biblical misdemeanors." The ones I considered the more "minor" type offenses.

Then came **EVIL** and evil (in my mind) consisted of things like theft, and scheming to hurt people, and swindling, and scamming people, breaking into houses to steal things, robbing banks, stealing cars or just plain being mean, or cruel.

And **WICKEDNESS** — to me that was like participating in Satanic Rituals, séances or witchcraft. It would be things like rape, violence, torture, abuse or serial murderer.

And I think we all do that (to a certain degree) when we want to justify indulging in some sin. Don't we? We choose to look at the bigger sins of others, make sure we don't go quite as far as them, and then think, "Surely I'm safe, or surely God will be more lenient with me since my sins aren't quite as bad as so and so."

I think I mentioned to some of you the 14-15 year old boy who I pulled aside outside a store in Norfolk, Massachusetts to ask him "what he would say to God if He were to stand before Him that night and God were to ask him why He should let him into heaven." And with all seriousness he said: "Because I'm not as bad as Hitler."

It was hard not to laugh when he said that, but in reality I had done the same thing when I was younger. I never would have said "I think God will let me get into heaven because I was better than Hitler." But I did justify my sins by making up my graded scale of sinfulness, and making sure my sins never got into the "wicked category."

In fact, I initially told myself that I'd only dabble in sin. I'd just try it for a while to see what its like, and then stop if I went too far. Yet, because I didn't fear God, and thus lacked divine wisdom, I didn't realize that once you begin to dabble in sin it grabs hold of you. It begins to possess you, and control you, and enslave you, and you find yourself wanting to stop but being unable to do so.

That's what I never counted on. I thought, "I can sin when I want to and stop whenever I choose to." "After all," I thought, "I do have a free will, and when I decide I've had my fill I'll just stop."

Boy was I in for a rude awakening! Because what I came to discover is that Jesus (of all people!) was right when he said, "He who sins is a slave to sin." That is, sin is like nicotine, morphine or hard drugs.

Over time it creates in a person's being a compulsive and addictive craving for more, which over time makes it nearly impossible for a person to simply "exercise their free will and say, No!"

I don't know how many times I said no, before I realized the hole I had gotten myself into—before I came to realize I had become a slave to my sin. It owned me. It controlled my thought life and dictated my priorities.

I could say the word "no," and pledge that I wouldn't do it again, but I couldn't stop those sinful cravings and urges! Cravings and urges so strong that I found myself, like Paul, not being able to do the thing I wanted to, and likewise not being able to stop doing the very thing I hated.

It's a miserable place to be! Believe me when I say you don't want to go there!

And I say that to you young people: You're in the place Uzziah was. Young and having your whole life ahead of you, and needing to decide what will be the guiding principle of your life. Looking, maybe, at all your unbelieving friends who have embraced sin, and wondering what's it like? Thinking it couldn't hurt—not just once! After all (like me) you're probably thinking, "I can try it this once and then just stop."

But let me warn you as a person who speaks from the bitter memories of personal experience (experience backed up by Scripture!): It's not that easy! The person who embraces sin will find themselves becoming bound and captive to it. Impulsively craving it and often unable to stop themselves from returning to it — or even wanting to stop! It will come to pollute your thoughts, twist and pervert your desires and affections, feed your urges, dictate your priorities, influence all your life choices, and even, in certain instances, control and destroy your life.

After a while, sin is like drugs. You have to have it, and if you don't get your fix of it, you become irritable, sometimes irrational and even (on occasion) hostile to the one who stands between you and it.

And it's true, if you've fallen to sin God does forgive. All who come to Him through Christ and repent do receive mercy. He will forgive, break the chains of sin, and restore all who look to Jesus!

Yet the Bible advocates an even better way. It's the way Uzziah took when he sought out someone to instruct him in the fear of God. A path he probably chose because he knew the admonition Moses had given to the people of God: "Learn to fear the Lord your God all the days of your life."

Do it my friends—young and old alike. You can't play with fire and not get burned! Sin has an insidious power. It aims to enslave the one who embraces it. That's its objective! And it preys on those, who because they DON'T have the wisdom that comes from fearing God, underestimate its power and purposes!

The best policy and the only wise one, is to shun evil and sin. That's what the fear of God and true understanding would lead us to do. And God will always bless that choice!