

No Fear of God in the Wicked

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flattereth himself in his own eyes, until his iniquity be found to be hateful. The words of his mouth are iniquity and deceit: he hath left off to be wise, and to do good. He deviseth mischief upon his bed; he setteth himself in a way that is not good; he abhorreth not evil. (Ps 36:1-4)

As we've developed the pattern of teaching on the fear of God from the poetic books of the Old Testament, we've discovered that a person's moral and ethical conduct reveals his fear of God, or lack thereof. So far we've examined various lessons that deal with the influence of the fear of God on righteous people. This lesson deals with the lack of that trait in the wicked.

The structure of this psalm is unusual. David begins with this lesson regarding the wicked not fearing God. Then in Ps 36:5-10 he develops a tender theme that relates to God's mercy and kindness to His people. Finally he closes the psalm (Ps 36:11-12) with an examination of the pride factor in the wicked. One could surmise that David thanks God for His goodness that gave him a healthy sense of the fear of God that is absent in the wicked.

How did David know that there was no fear of God in the wicked? His first clue addresses moral conduct, "The transgression of the wicked saith..." The wicked will not learn to respect the fear of God, but notice the rather subtle point that David makes, "...saith within *my* heart..." When David observed the lack of moral integrity in the wicked, he knew something about them that they may not have known about themselves. Notice the distinction between this lesson in which David confronts the lack of fear in the wicked, but deals with it in terms of his own thoughts, as contrasted with Ps 53 in which he deals with the same question, but focuses on the wicked.

At both the beginning and ending of Ps 36 David surfaces the pride factor in the immoral conduct of the wicked. Ps 36:2 indicates the wicked person's inclination toward self-flattery, and Ps 36:11-12 include a prayer to be delivered from the "foot of pride" where the wicked are fallen. In 1Ti 3:6 Paul forbids ordination to ministry of a "novice," one who is young and inexperienced in the faith "...lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil." Whether in the wicked or among the righteous, pride has no legitimate role in human thought and conduct.

From the beginning—literally so, as a reading of Ge 3 will reveal—Satan has used the appeal to pride as one of his primary weapons. Consider the setting in the Garden of Eden as you examine Satan's words to Eve, "...ye shall be as gods..." If these words appeared after the fall in the midst of Israel's struggles against pagan neighbors, it would not be unusual, but there was no idolatry in Eden. I suggest that Satan was actually enticing Eve with the idea that she and Adam could become like God by eating the forbidden fruit. He appealed to pride, ambition, and equally diminished God's goodness with the implication that God knowingly was withholding something of value from them. Human pride always reveals this two-sided coin, exaltation of man and diminishing of God. The Hebrew word translated "gods" is the common "Elohim" that Old Testament writers use for God. It is occasionally used of men in positions of high authority, but its most common use in the Old Testament is of God. Interestingly it appears in the plural form. Years ago in a conversation I had with a man who rejected the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity, I raised this passage as a subtle revelation of the Trinity at the very beginning of the Old Testament. His response was that the Hebrew language was not fully developed at this time, so the Hebrews didn't have a singular form for this word at the time Moses wrote Genesis. Later in my research of the word I discovered that the most frequent appearance of the singular form of this word appears in the book of Job, generally believed by Biblical scholars to have been written significantly

earlier than Moses' writings. Thus Moses intentionally chose the plural form of the word in Ge 3:5. Albeit subtle, this verse does set the stage for the Trinitarian teaching of Scripture regarding the essential nature of God. At its core human pride seeks to compete with God. And, in the context of this psalm, human pride rejects the fear of God in favor of its own agenda.

When we encounter evil people such as the people whose conduct David describes in this psalm, you may easily become too preoccupied with their evil and forget about God. David is a realist in terms of his assessment of the evil wicked person involved in the passage. He sees and acknowledges the depth of the evil deeds, as well as the depth of the evil character. However, David refused to make such wicked people the centerpiece of his life, even in terms of his disapproval. God was the focal point of his life, and, even when considering the dreadful impact of the wicked, David realistically examined them and returned to his focus on God. He didn't pretend they didn't exist. He didn't ignore them. But neither did he allow them to influence his life by their diabolical and cynical self-worship.

As there were "giants" in the land in the days prior to the flood (Ge 6:4), so "giants" have dominated human culture throughout history. I believe these "giants" were ordinary men who rose to the stature of highly influential men whose presence and conduct shaped the opinions and lives of the people around them, charismatic, dynamic leaders who knew how to mold the opinions of others. Had we lived in the time of Alexander the Great, no doubt we would have considered him a "giant." For those of us in this country any number of "giants" might be considered. What about George Washington or Abraham Lincoln? Or in more recent times Franklin Roosevelt or Winston Churchill? Ah, and then evil "giants" also come along, such as Hitler. Our human culture seeks out giants to look up to. If we don't look up to an individual "giant," we might look up to institutional giants. Every four years in our country avid political loyalists spend six to twelve months worshipping one or the other political party and the person that party chose to run for president of our country. If you listen to the rhetoric during that time, you'd almost think people believe that this person is the herald for the Second Coming, a true "giant" of sorts.

Our human nature seeks an object of worship. God alone deserves that position, but, when folks decide that worshipping God isn't sufficient, they will choose multiple gods of their own desires. The more we fall into this role of idolatry the more we cloud the question of our fear of God and of our exclusive worship of Him alone. We may create an object of worship in the things that we hate so viciously that we focus on them no less than idolizing the things that we love. How many people have you known who seemed determined always to have a mortal enemy whom they blamed for any and all of their personal problems? One of the most important points in this psalm for our personal discipleship is the incredible balance with which David deals with the question of wicked people. He acknowledges their existence. He examines their immoral (if not amoral) character quite realistically, but he does so in light of God's moral compass, not his own. He then immediately turns his greater focus onto God and praises God's attributes. How many divine attributes do you see in Ps 36:5-10?

Mercy, Ps 36:5.

Faithfulness, Ps 36:5.

Righteousness, Ps 36:6.

Judgments, Ps 36:6.

Loving kindness, Ps 36:7.

From these essential attributes of God, he develops the theme of God's incredible goodness toward His people, establishing that, despite any conduct by anyone who has no fear of God, God's goodness prevails on behalf of His children.

Given this balance of reality toward the wicked and adoring worship toward God, how much impact would you predict that these wicked people would have on David's life? I'd say almost none at all. I can't recall the source, but several years ago I read a brief quip that really caught my mind. "If you fear God, you will fear nothing else. If you do not fear God, you will fear everything else." The truth and practical impact of this simple cliché should instruct each of us daily.

Given the delightful message of Ps 36, I ask you, and myself, a question. How strong is our fear of God? Do we equivocate back and forth between this false dichotomy of God's love and our fear, not quite knowing what to do with either? Or do we group all fear under the heading of dread, something to be avoided and overcome? If so, this may be the reason that we live in such frequent fear of so many "things" in our life. Perhaps it is time to cultivate the fear of God.