

“The Fear of Christ”
Ephesians 5:21
(Preached at Trinity, August 16, 2015)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Paul has been instructing his readers on demonstrating with their lives the reality of their Christian conversion.
The Christian life is empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the source of faith and repentance. He is the agent of regeneration. And He is the power behind our sanctification. This is at the heart of the passage beginning with **Verse 18**
Ephesians 5:18 NAU - "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit"
2. **Verse 21** begins the lengthy section with a focus upon submission. As always, the focus of the NT is always Trinitarian. While Paul's focus is on the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer this entire section is permeated with Christ.
Ephesians 5:21 NAU - "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ."
Ephesians 5:22 NAU - "Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord."
Ephesians 6:1 NAU - "Children, obey your parents in the Lord"
Ephesians 6:5-6 NAU - "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart."
3. The transforming work of the Gospel within our hearts changes everything. It begins with our new relationship with Christ. He is the focus of our lives. His greatness makes us more and more aware of our smallness. It humbles us before God and man. Paul's charge to us is at the heart of this humility - "be subject to one another." At the end of **Verse 21** Paul implies that the ultimate motivation for our right relationship with others is the fear of Christ. But what does this mean?
 - A. This is the only place in the NT where we read of "the fear of Christ."
 - B. We do find in Acts 9:31; 2 Cor. 5:11 – "the fear of the Lord"
 - C. We find "the fear of the LORD" 23 times in the OT
 - D. All of these are synonymous with "the fear of God" which is the way the text of the TR KJV reads here.
But remember, this section maintains Christ at the center.
4. What does Paul mean, "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ."
It is so important for us to understand this that I want to devote this morning's sermon to it. It's at the heart of understanding the Gospel.
5. There are many who tremble before the Law and serve Christ out of fear of the Law's condemnation. But this is not what Paul means here?
This morning I want to set before you the proper understanding of the fear of God.

- I. First of all, it is possible to become so hardened as to have no fear of God
- Psalms 36:1 NAU** - "Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; There is no fear of God before his eyes."
- A. There are those who live as though God does not exist
1. They pretend God does not see
 2. David described them
- Psalms 94:4-7 NAU** - "They pour forth *words*, they speak arrogantly; All who do wickedness vaunt themselves. ⁵ They crush Your people, O LORD, And afflict Your heritage. ⁶ They slay the widow and the stranger And murder the orphans. ⁷ They have said, "The LORD does not see, Nor does the God of Jacob pay heed."
- B. This is the consequence of unchecked sin
1. Sin continues to pollute and harden the heart. Although we bear the image of God the image can become so marred that a man can become like a brute beast.
 2. For many in our society this is sadly their condition
 3. Their corrupt hearts have left them in a state of moral blindness
They are more like animals than men
- Jude 1:10 NAU** - "But these men revile the things which they do not understand; and the things which they know by instinct, like unreasoning animals, by these things they are destroyed."
- 2 Peter 2:12 NAU** - "But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed,"
4. There is no worse state to be in
- Psalms 14:1 NAU** - "The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good."
- C. Religious people can fall into an unholy familiarity
1. There is no fear of God. No sense of His absolute holiness, the brightness of His glory
 2. This was the sin of Nadab and Abihu whom God consumed in His wrath
History is marked by religious people who behaved as if God did not exist.
They live as if God does not see and that His Law doesn't apply to them.
- II. There are those who fear God but it is an unholy fear, a sinful fear
- A. This unholy fear of God was one of the consequences of Adam's sin
1. Before the fall Adam had a true and proper reverence for God – a godly fear
 2. Adam had the confidence that God was working for his good. He was in a true and proper communion with God
 - a. God was the source of all his comfort and confidence
 - b. Adam savored fellowship with God. He had unity with God.
 3. With sin this communion was crushed. For the first time he trembled in fear at the presence of God. Adam and Eve tried to hide themselves from God

Genesis 3:8 NAU - "They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden."

4. Sin resulted in an unholy fear of God – a mistrust of God—a doubt that God has our best interests in mind.

Genesis 3:10 NAU - "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself."

- B. This unholy fear of God characterizes fallen man. We lack the ability to comprehend God

1. We know of God's existence. We know of His wrath. We know of the demands of God's Law. But we hate God's Law and yet we fear to disobey. It is Law with no Gospel
2. Jesus taught of this fear in the parable of the talents –
Matthew 25:24-25 NAU - "And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. ²⁵ 'And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.'"
3. Lost men try to suppress the reality of God's judgment, yet they cannot hide from it and so they are smitten with fear.
Romans 1:18 NAU - "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,"
4. There are multitudes of religious people who fear God in this sinful way. They are afraid of His wrath. They serve Him out of fear. They are legalistically involved in the church, not because they love God and His people but because of fear. They often try to drag others into this legalistic graceless obedience. They know nothing of the Gospel of grace.
5. Unholy fear is a timidity or cowardice that does not find its source in God. It is not of faith.
Romans 14:23 NAU - "whatever is not from faith is sin."
6. Such fear only results in condemnation. The lost man should fear. They have every right to fear.
Revelation 21:8 KJV - "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."
Luke 12:4-5 NAU - "I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. ⁵ "But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!"
Hebrews 10:31 NAU - "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

This is not the fear Paul is speaking of in **Verse 21**.
Paul is talking about a holy fear—a Godly fear

III. Godly fear is to have the highest reverence for God.

- A. Godly fear is to stand in awe of His majesty – it is the true worship that God demands
1. The fear of God is that grace in the heart of the believer that brings him to approach God in a proper manner – with awe and reverence.
 2. To fear God is to have a sense of the infinite majesty of God. He dwells in light unapproachable. His throne is surrounded by holiness
See Isaiah 6:1-5
 3. This Godly fear is the highest of Christian graces
John Calvin – "it is comprehensive of all true godliness, or the worship of God."
Samuel Davies – "The fear of the lord implies all the graces and all the virtues of Christianity and all that holiness of heart and life which is necessary to the enjoyment of everlasting happiness."
- B. Such a holy reverence demands the transforming grace Paul has been writing about
1. Godly fear demands coming to a right understanding about God
 - a. The Bible teaches us that the fear of God is the chief element in knowing God as well as its chief fruit
Psalms 111:10 NAU - "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do *His commandments*; His praise endures forever."
Proverbs 1:7 NAU - "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction."
 - b. To have the fear of God is to have that divine wisdom imparted to us enabling us to think on a spiritual level
 2. This holy fear is characteristic of our faith in Christ.
 - a. Modern Christianity often has a low view of Christ. They see Him more like a friend, someone to approach with high-fives. But the risen Christ is dwelling in majesty and glory.
 - b. We must have a holy reverence of Him. It is both our nature and our duty
Deuteronomy 6:13 NAU - "You shall fear *only* the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name."
Ecclesiastes 12:13 NAU - "The conclusion, when all has been heard, *is*: fear God and keep His commandments, because this *applies to* every person."

IV. What is the consequence of a Godly fear?

- A. It affects how we approach Him. This fear is the result of knowing God
1. We understand who He is. We understand His splendor and majesty
LBC 2:1 – “. . . who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, who is immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, every way infinite, most holy, most wise, most free, most absolute . . .”

2. We approach Him in all His divine excellence and perfection. It brings us the peace and comfort that we are under God's tender care
Psalms 103:13 NAU - "Just as a father has compassion on *his* children, So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him."
Psalms 33:18 NAU - "Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, On those who hope for His lovingkindness,"
 3. A holy fear always drives us to Christ—sinful fear away from Him
- B. Such a Godly fear will always result in humility and obedience
1. To have a Godly fear is to follow God regardless of life's circumstances
 The early church knew what it was to suffer – yet they continued to walk in the fear of God
Acts 9:31 NAU - "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase."
 2. Trials drive the unbeliever away but they drive the believer to rest in the majesty and glory of God in full humility and self-denial. The church has always been the strongest during times of persecution.
 3. A proper fear of Christ is an obedience based not upon a fear of God's judgment but a fear based upon a comprehension of God's divine excellence. It is fear generated in a heart of love for God.
 This is the distinction between servile and evangelical obedience.
 4. The God fearer delights in the commandments of God
 Holy fear results in a holy disposition – a delight in holiness.
 5. There is a difference between obeying God out of a sense of duty and a fear of God's displeasure and delighting in obedience out of a desire to exalt God.

Conclusion:

1. Paul is describing our highest motivation for submitting to one another. We submit to one another out of our holy reverence for Christ. This is transforming. A holy fear of God humbles us and affects everything in our lives
2. Why does the Godly wife submit to her husband?
 Why does the Godly man deny himself for the sake of His wife always with her as the priority of his life.
 Why does the Godly child submit to his parents and why do his parents sacrifice in training him up.
 Why does the servant (or employee) submit to his master?
3. For the Christian, is not our highest motive the fear of Christ—our holy reverence for Him?