

Fear Not

"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Jesus continues his missionary charge to his disciples. "Fear" is the theme of this lesson. Three times in the span of this passage disciples are told not to fear. Of course, Jesus isn't forbidding the experiencing of the emotion of fear, but teaching his disciples that they're not to be paralyzed by fear, covered by it, or prevented from accomplishing their mission because of it.

Fear of God is different from fear of humans. Fear of God is appropriate, given his awesome power. But, also given his awesome love, fear of God doesn't paralyze, but liberates. Fear of humans has no foundation in fact, real fact, that is, from the eternal perspective. If anything is going to prevent the spread of the Gospel message, it will be human fears. Jesus dismisses such fears as baseless and to be overcome by concentrating on the bigger picture, the eternal perspective.

Mankind is beset with fears. There's:

Mysophobia -- fear of "dirt."

Hydrophobia -- fear of "water."

Nyclophobia -- fear of "darkness."

Acrophobia -- fear of "high places."

Taxophobia -- Not fear of April 15th, but fear of being "buried alive."

And a slew of others. Fears that hinder our efficaciousness and functionality--you know, mess us up. William Gurnall hit the nail on the head when he said: "We fear men so much because we fear God so little." It's that distinction again.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones perceptively adds:

"Many fear what man can do to them but not what God will do at the judgment day if they do not repent and turn to Him in faith. I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear. Fear is not my native land; faith is. I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. I live better by faith and confidence than by fear, doubt and anxiety. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath--these are not my native air. But in faith and confidence, I breathe freely--these are my native air."

"Fear not." Jesus lays out the distinction and prepares us for the rude reality of a society and world hostile to Christianity. Some would say, "It doesn't seem so hostile to me." That may well be, but not for the vast

majority of the world. Ask any Christian who lives in the former U.S.S.R. and survived the Communist era, ask any Christian who happens to live in an Arabic country--any of these could tell you a thing or two about life threatening hostility.

Ask Pastor Li of China. He stood in front of the chopping block, a Communist guard on each side of him. He trembled as they placed his right hand on the block and spread his fingers wide. The officer in front of him ran his finger along the blade of the cleaver he was holding. Without lifting his eyes from it, he asked Pastor Li, "Will you stop preaching the name of Jesus?"

"No, I will not," answered Li. And he closed his eyes, waiting for the ax to fall. It did, and he lost his right thumb. Five times he was asked to deny his Christ. Five times he refused. Five times he paid the price. Then, with nothing left of his right hand but a bleeding palm, he was set free.

This horrifying event happened some years ago during China's cultural revolution. And Pastor Li's story is only one of thousands of similar stories – stories about sacrificial faith, about the cost of discipleship, about the price of confessing Christ.

In our own country, not so much life threatening, but hostility, nonetheless, try publicly renouncing homosexuality, abortion, the teaching of evolution and prayer in our schools, try taking on the media moguls to clean up the entertainment industry. I dare say you will meet and greet hostility head on.

The common lot of a disciple, ancient or modern, is to face rejection. The common lot of a Christian is to encounter trouble. It's a given. "In this world you will have trouble," Jesus advises.

Longfellow penned:

"The fate is the common fate of all;

Into each life some rain must fall."

Particularly is this true for the Christian willing to go public with his faith. But, again, as regards man, we are to fear not, but "Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Speaking of the righteous judgment of God. There's something to be feared! There's the crux of the matter, the matter of our eternal condition. Sticks and stones can break my bones, but not my soul. But, fear the one who can, who can destroy the whole person--body, soul, and spirit.

Helen Keller, blind and deaf from the age of two, knows well the distinction. She writes:

They took away what should have been my eyes,

(But I remembered Milton's Paradise).

They took away what should have been my ears,

(Beethoven came and wiped away my tears).

They took away what should have been my tongue,

(But I had talked with God when I was young).

He would not let them take away my soul--

Possessing that, I still possess the whole.

"Don't be afraid," Jesus says. "Don't fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." But, do be afraid of God's holy wrath against evil.

Afraid of God's absolute justice that will prevail over all.

Isaiah warns people who could care less:

The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy,

he is the one you are to fear,

he is the one you are to dread,

. . . he will be a stone that causes men to stumble

and a rock that makes them fall.

The writer to the Hebrews sounds a similar ominous warning of God's ultimate judgment: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," for "our God is a consuming fire."

Serious stuff. The One who can destroy both soul and body in hell has a power and penalty not limited to our time on earth, but extending to the world to come. The consequences of rejecting God are permanent; those who chose to deny and disown Jesus here on earth are stuck with the consequences of their choice forever and aye. These are those for whom the bell of fear tolls.

They'll eventually get theirs, our lesson says. Justice will be served. "So don't be afraid of them.," Jesus teaches, "There's nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known." Will come a time when all will be laid bare and God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

We shouldn't be too hasty to brush off our Lord's warning by relegating it to the heathen, either. It's a warning that lands smack dab in our lap. Remember, Jesus is addressing His disciples, which includes us by extension. He's making eye contact with us, not the heathen at this point. His is a real concern for His disciples facing a hostile and wicked world. People, disciples, Christians, do fall from grace. Our theology, which is founded and grounded on God's Word, does not support the notion "Once saved, always saved." People do disown the Lord. People do sell out on God. Even though we are God's holy people, forgiven and

saved, we need a healthy and holy respect for God's righteousness and sovereign judgment. We need to be faithful in Word and Sacrament to frequently fortify our faith.

As is so characteristic of our Lord, despite the warning, despite the severity of law, despite the necessity of God's alien work, nevertheless, His proper work, His grace and mercy work, His Gospel work far outshadows and predominates. One time He cautions, "Be afraid," but three times Jesus comforts us with "Fear not, Do not be afraid."

He shifts into Gospel gear and asks: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father." Sparrows were sold in the marketplace for food and were the cheapest of all--bought and eaten by the poorest of the poor. They were insignificant, of no account, but not to God. There's a powerful message there about our Lord. He watches every little sparrow, cares for the humblest creature--all creatures great and small.

That being the case, what about us? He says, "So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." We have great worth in God's eyes, great value in His sight, all of us, especially those who don't feel worthy at all. Never get the notion that God doesn't care about you, that He can't possibly be concerned about little you personally, individually. On the contrary, He knows you intimately, knows your name, knows more about you than you know yourself, knows, Jesus says, even the very number of hairs of your head.

Fear not. God is in control. There is precision in our Lord's knowledge and grace. He loves us particularly, personally, precisely. And nothing can separate us from that love.

Yes, troubles will come and fears will haunt us, but Jesus's word to us is "Fear not." "A righteous man may have many troubles," the Bible affirms, "but the Lord delivers him from them all. . . .He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord."

Longfellow's poem continues:

"Be still sad heart, and cease repining,
Behind the clouds the sun is shining."

Yes indeed, behind the clouds of worry and fear and persecution in this world shines the glorious splendor of He who watches over us and is in control. Take heart and fear not. Our Lord has made provision for our miserable condition, our inability to keep from sinning, our pathetic propensity to buy into the world's ways, our failure to speak of Him when we should. He's given us a way out, a way up, given His life for us that we

might live, given us the prospect and promise of life eternal.

Fear not, God is in control. And God is faithful. Faith conquers fear; especially is that true when it's God's faith and not ours. And thank God we don't depend on our faithfulness, but on His. There's the real source of our security! "His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart," says the Psalm. "You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day." Night or day, do not be afraid, for He who watches over you will neither slumber nor sleep. . . . The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore."

Yes, the sun is shining, indeed. Take heart, fear not, praise God, Amen.