

Ephesians: *The Fear of the Lord*
Ephesians 5:5-14

Before we get started, I want to quickly brief you regarding the preaching schedule for this summer. Today will mark my final sermon on Ephesians for the summer due to my very busy travel schedule in the next two months. Many of you know that I am part of the mission team going to Guatemala the first two weeks in July. When I return from Guatemala, I have a special vacation planned with my bride, a trip with Compassion International, some time with our extended families on the East Coast, and all of that will keep me living out of a suitcase through the 13th of August.

In my absence, our pastoral team has put together an outstanding preaching schedule. Beginning next Sunday, Pastor Tami will kick off a three-week series on Godly Parenting and Grandparenting. By the way, the final week of that series will feature Dr. Ken Canfield, founder of the National Association for Grandparenting as well as a long-time member at Colonial. Next, we will host our annual Youth Sunday on July 23rd. Finally, our Campus Pastors will present a three-week campus-specific series on reaching our immediate neighbors with the hope of the Gospel that will conclude on August 13th. It is currently my intent to resume our journey through Ephesians beginning on August 20th.

So, as we return to Ephesians 5, Paul has been addressing the early church, calling the believers to be “imitators of God” and to “walk in love as Christ loved us.” Paul goes on to firmly condemn behaviors that are altogether inconsistent with walking in love...behaviors such as sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, idolatry, filthy language and crude joking. We’ll pick up there as we stand and read Ephesians 5:5-14.

⁵For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. ⁶Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷Therefore do not become partners with them; ⁸for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ⁹(for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), ¹⁰and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹²For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. ¹³But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, ¹⁴for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

My message will fall under four subheadings: 1) The Fear of the Lord; 2) Empty Words; 3) The Standard; and 4) How to Please the Lord.

I. The Fear of the Lord

There is a difference between knowing the right thing to do, and then being motivated to do the right thing. For example: we all know that we should be exercising about 30 minutes a day, right? For those of us over 50, this is a redundant message that we hear every time we get our annual physical. However, most of us do not exercise 30 minutes a day until we get a bit of

motivation...like a mild heart-attack...or the early onset of diabetes...or our company gives us incentives like Burns and Mac to get out and walk every day! My point is simply this: for human beings to be motivated to do what they already know is right...or to stop doing what they already know is wrong...will require some significant motivation of some kind. That motivation typically comes in the form of fear or reward or both.

The Apostle Paul is not ignorant regarding human behavior. Even though the new believers in Ephesus may be quite sincere about their love for Jesus and their love for each other, Paul knows that setting aside old sinful habits and developing new, God-honoring habits will not happen without significant effort for those in the early church. So, Paul reminds the church of their motivation which comes first in a healthy, holy fear of the Lord and secondly in their new identity in Christ as children of light. First, Paul reminds the believers to fear the Lord.

In vss. 5-7 Paul writes: 5 For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. 7 Therefore do not become partners with them;

Even though Paul spent three chapters celebrating the church's election, their adoption as children of God, and their unmerited salvation by grace alone, Paul reminds the church that a soul given over to indulgent sin is one that will forfeit the inheritance of eternal life. Paul reminds the church that it is precisely because of these practices of sinful rebellion, immorality, and idolatry that God's wrath is coming upon those who refuse to repent and remain unredeemed. In other words, Paul reminds the church to *fear God*. A healthy fear of God motivates the Christian to do what is right and to stop doing what is wrong.

Now, I know you don't like that word, "fear." Many of us wonder how we can reconcile our assurance of salvation and at the same time maintain a healthy fear of the Lord. N.T. scholar John Stott writes:

The assurance of salvation is neither a synonym for or an excuse for presumption. If we should fall into a life of greedy immorality, we would be supplying clear evidence that we are after all idolaters, not worshippers of God, disobedient people instead of obedient, and so the heirs not of heaven but of hell. The apostle gives us a solemn warning; we shall be wise to heed it.¹

Church, the Bible regularly teaches us to fear God. There are over 200 references in the Bible regarding the fear of the Lord. A few examples include:

Deuteronomy 6:13: "Fear the LORD your God, serve Him only and take your oaths in His name."

Psalm 2:11: "Serve the LORD with fear and celebrate His rule with trembling."

2 Corinthians 5:11: "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others."

1 Peter 2:17: "Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor."

Psalm 25:14 "The Lord is a friend to those who fear Him."

Psalm 103:17 "But the love of the Lord remains forever with those who fear Him.

Proverbs 1:7: The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

¹ John Stott: *The Message of Ephesians*, 198.

Now, to be clear, the Bible does not call us to “be afraid” of God...to be afraid of God would be to think of God as an abuser and a tyrant. The Bible does not call us to be afraid of God, but to “fear the Lord” as a posture of respect, awe, reverence, and accountability before God’s immeasurable, infinite power and glory.

I have recently been reading *The Awe of God* by John Bevere. Based on an extensive survey of scripture, Bevere provides a pretty comprehensive list of what it means to have a holy fear of God:

To fear God is to reverence and be in complete awe of Him.

To fear God is to esteem, respect, honor, venerate, and adore Him above anyone or anything else.

When we fear God, we take on His heart. We love what He loves, and we hate what He hates. What is important to Him becomes important to us. What is not so important to Him becomes not so important to us.

To fear God is to hate sin.

To fear God is to hate injustice.

To fear God is to depart from evil in every sense—thought, word, and action. It is to refrain from speaking deceitfully.

The fear of God will not say or put on an appearance that is untrue to one’s heart and thoughts.

The fear of God keeps our outward behavior congruent with our inward thoughts, motives and beliefs.

To fear God is to walk in authentic humility before God and mankind.

To fear God is to give Him the praise, adoration, thanksgiving, and worship He deserves.

To fear God is to give Him all that belongs to Him.

To fear God is to obey Him. It’s not just a desire but an inward force determined to carry out His will, no matter the cost. We eagerly, willingly, and immediately obey—and we carry it out to completion.

To fear God is to respect, honor, and submit to His direct and delegated authority.

The fear of the Lord shapes our intentions, thoughts, words, and actions.²

Now, that list may seem a bit overwhelming, but I hope you can see that the fear of the Lord is a big deal in scripture...which means it should always be a big deal for Christians. I know that some of you struggle to imagine what it might be like to have a healthy fear of the Lord, and that may largely be due to the way you were raised. If you did not have a healthy relationship with your parents, the idea of “healthy fear” may be completely foreign for you. For many of us, however, we need only look to our relationship with our parents...or our current relationship with our own children, to understand the necessity of living in a healthy fear of authority.

Whenever I think of “the fear of the Lord,” I think of the relationship I had with my Dad when I was a little boy. My Dad was big and strong, I was puny. Dad was the law giver and the law enforcer in our family, and I was expected to obey the laws and abide by his expectations. Such is why I feared my Dad. I knew my Dad loved me, but my Dad never attempted to be my “buddy”. He was my Father...he was not to be trifled with or disrespected. I wasn’t afraid of him per se, but I respected, revered, and was subject to his authority. It was my “fear of Dad” that motivated me to make my bed every morning, clean up my room, get home on time, and do my chores before watching T.V. That healthy fear of Dad motivated countless decisions to do what I knew was right and resist doing those things I knew were wrong. I knew I could be assured of Dad’s pleasure if I was doing what I was supposed to do...which meant I had nothing

² John Bevere, *The Awe of God*, 17-18.

to fear; however, if I stepped out of line or failed to do what I was supposed to do, I had MUCH to fear because Dad would discipline me...which was painful, but even more than that, I knew that my poor behavior was potentially damaging to our relationship...and I cared deeply about our relationship.

The natural relationship between a little boy and his dad in many ways points to the spiritual relationship we are to have with God as His beloved children.

I have no doubt this is one of the primary reasons that “Obey your mother and father” was given to us as the fifth commandment. If we never learn to obey our loving parents, we will struggle to live in an obedient relationship with our loving God, right? Pastor Tami will be preaching on Godly parenting next Sunday, but if you are a parent with small children, please know that part of your job is teaching your children to live in a healthy fear of you which prepares your children to live in a healthy fear of God. Our children should know that we unconditionally love them no matter what, but they also need to know that they are responsible to please us with their obedience.

As you all know, I was recently away to Canada for a week. As I prepared to leave, I gave some instructions to my son Jonah on how I wanted him to tend to our rather large vegetable garden in my absence. I was also hopeful that I would return to find that someone had bothered to mow the yard, and everyone in my family knows that I am exceptionally pleased to come home to a house that is clean and in order. So, when I finally got home last weekend, I walked in the door and the house was spotless and in order. When I stepped out the next morning, the yard was perfectly mowed, trimmed, and my garden was free of weeds and the plants looked watered and healthy. I was overjoyed and extremely pleased! I went out of my way to celebrate and thank each member of my family who worked hard to please me as Dad. I received their obedience and service as a sign of their love and respect for me, and they were happy and proud that they could bring me delight by their good works.

Church: Children delight in the pleasure of their Father; which is why it is incredibly significant that God reveals Himself to the world as “Father” through His Son, Jesus of Nazareth. And it’s incredibly significant that Paul writes here in vs. 8, “...for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as *children* of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true).”

As those who have been redeemed, our identity has been given to us: we are children of light! God is our Father now, and we are to walk in the fear of the Lord as obedient children. The fruit of our lives should bear witness to the fact that we are children of light...we are no longer sons of disobedience...we are no longer darkness. As children of light, our behavior, attitudes, and actions should bear witness to and honor our Father.

When we examine the life of Jesus, we see that He lived in constant awareness of and submission to His Father. He thought constantly about what the Father said, what the Father instructed, and what pleased His Father. Jesus did not think of the Father as His “buddy” or even

as His equal. Philippians 2 says He humbled himself, becoming like a servant, and was obedient...obedient even when it required His death on a cross. Jesus died to save us all...but Jesus ultimately went to the cross to please His Father. Jesus “feared the Lord.”

And Jesus taught us to fear the Lord. In Luke 12:4-7 Jesus said:

I tell you my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear Him who, after He has killed you, has authority to cast you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Jesus knows His disciples are going to be tempted to quit. They are going to run up against all kinds of threats, persecution, and even martyrdom. But Jesus breathes courage into them by reminding them Who holds the real power. God is to be feared, and God alone. God has infinite, power and authority...not just over the physical, but also over the spiritual, which is eternal. And here’s the thing: the One to be feared is the One who loves us more than any other. The One to be feared is the One who is intimately familiar with all of our ways, and He values us as His children. Jesus is clear: Fear God, fear nothing else.

Oswald Chambers writes: The remarkable thing about God is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.³

So, let me ask you a question: Do you fear the Lord? Are you the least bit concerned about how He evaluates your work, your thought life, your marriage, your habits, your language, or your parenting? Are you at all concerned about God’s opinion regarding what you look at on the internet or the music you are listening to? Does the Lord’s discipline make you tremble at the thought of disobeying Him?

Let me ask you another question. What do you fear more: 1) the judgment of God; or 2) missing out? If the truth be told, many of us fear missing out more than we fear the judgment of God. We resist commitments because we might miss out on an opportunity to do something fun or different. Our teenagers are constantly bombarded with the idea that they are missing out through the world of social media. Every commercial on T.V. is designed to make you feel like you are missing out if you don’t purchase the company’s product. I get it...I sometimes struggle with the anxiety of missing out...it’s a huge challenge in our culture of endless opportunities.

That said, I can’t help but wonder how many of the decisions we make every day are linked to our fear of missing out...or our fear of what people think of us...or our fear of giving up control...or our fear of growing old...or our fear of so, so, many things.

All human beings fear something that informs and motivates their behavior. Some of those fears are healthy and reasonable. We fear skin cancer, so we wear sunscreen. We fear burning our

³ Quoted by Bevere, p 70.

hands, so we use potholders. We fear getting into a car accident, so we stop when the light turns red. Healthy fear is a good thing. Church: nothing is more healthy than to fear the Lord.

However, unhealthy fear is also a real problem. The fear of missing out...or fearing the opinions of our friends at school...or fearing how people will think of us if we don't conform to their expectations...or fearing that we are not unique...or fearing that we will never get married...or fearing that we will never have children...these are all unhealthy fears that can have tremendous power over us.

Here's the truth: many, many Christians sitting in churches no longer fear the Lord. We do not tremble in His presence. We carry little concern about how God views our life-choices. For so many people sitting in churches, God has become our "buddy" or our distant "grandparent" who is always there for us when we have need. He minds His own business until we call upon Him. He only knows what we tell Him; and He is always encouraging and approving of us because He is a God of grace, not judgment. In other words, the God in our head...the God that we think is there...bears little resemblance to the God Jesus told us to fear. Sadly, many of us grew up in churches that failed to tell us the truth about God; and even now, many are subject to false teachers. This is why Paul writes, "Let no one deceive you with empty words..."

II. Empty Words

The Apostle Peter writes:

There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words...these are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. (2 Peter 2:1-3, 17).

Paul makes a similar prophecy to his apprentice Timothy : (2 Tim 4:3-4) For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Church, do not be deceived by empty words. God will not be mocked. We cannot sit in the church, pretending to be good, moral, Christian people and then secretly indulge in darkness and somehow think that's going to end well. Nothing that we are currently doing in our lives will go unnoticed. We will all stand before God and give an account.

Jesus promises in Luke 8:17: Nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. Be careful then how you *hear*, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.

Be careful how you *hear*. You may find any number of "teachers" who will tell you that your sexual sin is not a sin. You may find any number of YouTube videos of people telling you that science has disproven God. You may find any number of college professors who will tell you that only people who are anti-intellectual believe in the Bible. In our world today, you can find a person with some degree of authority to tell you whatever you want to hear. I would simply point you to what Paul said right here in Ephesians 5:5:

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure or who is covetous (that is an idolater) has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore, do not become partners with them.

This is the word of the Lord. You would do well to heed it. And I cannot urge you strongly enough to avoid false teaching. Hold everything you hear up to scripture, and seek the Lord to discern what is true. Read the Bible for yourself to discover who God truly is...don't take anyone's word or opinion or interpretation to be authoritative—not even mine as your pastor. You must read the Word of God because the Word of God is authoritative, amen? I will promise you this: if you will read the Bible for yourself, you will come to fear the Lord. And the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom. Now...Paul has more to say, and that leads to my next subheading.

III. The Standard

If you were to ask my four children what pleases their father, they would inevitably say, “Respect Mom. Tell the truth. Clean up after yourself. Cut the grass when it gets long. Give Dad a hug when he gets home from work. Go on hunting and fishing trips with Dad. Take responsibility for your actions. Be respectful of those in authority”...and a whole list of other things they have learned over the years as those who live in relationship with their Dad.

This is now the standard that Paul presents for those who are called children of light. “Try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.” As God’s adopted children...as those who live in a daily relationship with the Father, we are obedient not out of duty or obligation, but because we know our obedience pleases God. And of course, the best way we can please the Father is by obeying the commands and following the example of His Son. Alexander MacLaren speaks to this point so well:

So, then, there is a standard-not what men approve, not what my conscience, partially illuminated, may say is permissible, not what is recognized as allowable by the common maxims of the world round about us, but Christ’s approval. How different the hard, stern, and often unwelcome prescriptions of law and rigidity of some standards of right become when they are changed into that which pleases the Divine Lord and Lover! Surely it is something blessed that the hard, cold, and to such a large extent powerless conceptions of duty or obligation shall be changed into pleasing Jesus Christ; and that so our hearts shall be enlisted in the service of our consciences, and love shall be glad to do the Beloved’s will. There are many ways by which the burden of life’s obligations is lightened to the Christian. I do not know that any of them is more precious than the fact that law is changed into His will, and that we seek to do what is right because it pleases the Master. There is the standard. The faults into which Christian men fall and in which they continue are very largely owing to their carelessness in applying this standard to the small things of their daily lives. ⁴

Church, how often do you think about pleasing the Lord in the small things of your daily life? It’s a reasonable question, because it is our nature to work for the pleasure of those we love. Do you know what pleases Jesus? We can look at recent passages in Ephesians and find several ways we can please Jesus, right? Forgive one another as we have been forgiven. Love one another as Christ first loved us. And now Paul gives us a few more ways to please Jesus here at the end of our text.

IV. How to Please the Lord

⁴ Alexander MacLaren: *Expositions of Holy Scripture-Ephesians*, 282.

First, says, Paul, “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness...” Our commitment to abstain from the works of darkness is pleasing to our Lord...just as our commitment to abstain from using drugs would be pleasing to our parents. We must remember: every day is a gift from God. Every day is an opportunity to make the most of the time that God has given us. And as children of light, the fruit of our lives that bring glory to God comes from walking in the light...not indulging in darkness. The fruit of a life lived in the light of Christ is found in “all that is good and right and true.” So, we can please our Lord and our Heavenly Father when we refrain from works of darkness...behaviors, attitudes, words, jokes, investments, and so on that bear no fruit.

Second, Paul writes, “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but expose them.” Now, this directive sounds like Paul is telling the Church to be whistle blowers, as though we are somehow responsible for exposing the sinful behavior of others. We must be careful here. I think it’s more likely that Paul is charging the Church to not keep secrets...to confess our challenges with darkness so that we can better overcome those challenges by walking in the light and carrying each other’s burdens (Galatians 6:2). I think we all know that the power of sin is secrecy. So, Paul may very well be saying that it would please the Lord for us to expose our habits of darkness so that our lives may be void of secrets and so that we learn to walk in the light with integrity.

Now, we must also acknowledge that as children of light, our very presence will expose works of darkness without us having to say or point out anything at all.

I was invited one night to a neighborhood card game with a bunch of men. We all had boys on the same ball team, and we had developed a pretty good friendship. The night was going along fine until they pulled out all the shot glasses and the guys began to get drunk. My presence in that room made everyone feel noticeably uncomfortable, but I never said a word. I didn’t partake in the shots...I was there amongst them to enjoy playing cards and hanging out, but the light of Christ in me exposed the unfruitful behavior that was going on around me. Sometimes that’s the role we are called to play as those who belong to Christ. We don’t partner with those engaged in darkness, but we don’t separate ourselves in a way that our light is powerless to effect change.

Paul goes on to say, “For it is shameful to even speak of the things they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light.”

This verse is not easy to understand, and I don’t have time to get too deep into it. The contrast here is again between secrecy (which is darkness), and being exposed, which is to be in the light. The light makes things plain. The light allows us to see things for the way they really are. The light removes the cloak of confusion. So that part of Paul’s statement makes perfect sense. It’s hard, however, to understand what he means when he writes, “...for anything that becomes visible is light.”

Some commentators suggest, and I agree, that Paul may very well be pointing to the effect of the Gospel’s power to convert a human soul. A soul lifted out of darkness becomes visible...becomes known...becomes real and accessible and understood...and the result is a soul that now bears light to others. That is the picture that comes with the ancient hymn that he

quotes here at the end of vs. 14: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

In many respects, this is what happens when a soul is delivered out of darkness into the light of Christ. It is as though we have been asleep...we have been spiritually dead...and now we live in the light of Jesus, and we are transformed into those who are children of light. So Church, walk as children of light.

I fear I have given you enough to think about this morning to last the whole rest of the summer! I particularly hope that you will give great thought to the fear of the Lord. Take some time this week to do your own research into this concept. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is required if we are to truly know God and bring Him glory.

As we prepare to go, I implore you: walk as children of light. Our walk matters, amen? May our lives point people to all that is good, right, and true.

Will you pray with me?