

# The Fear of Man

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## Introduction

This resource is a short study about what the Bible describes as the “fear of man.” It may be a new concept for you, but it’s pervasive in Scripture. One of the most dominant questions in the Bible is, “Whom will you fear: God or people?” This question is central to the Bible because it’s ultimately a question about *worship*. To whom will we render worship? To whom will we submit? Who will we seek to please? God or people?

At some level, all people are plagued by the fear of man. I know that sounds like an overstatement—but it’s not. As a pastor, I see it on a weekly basis. Everyone is plagued by it, but most don’t even realize it. The fear of man is one of those root sins operating under the surface, causing us all kinds of problems. Many believers struggle for years, trying to battle its manifestations, without realizing their underlying problem with the fear of man.

And pastors aren’t immune either. Just like you, I have had and continue to have battles with the fear of man. A few years ago, I had one of my largest battles with the fear of man and it took me a while to realize it. At our church, we are privileged to be part of a network of eleven other churches that partner together to train men for ministry in the Expositors Seminary. Every summer, the main campus pastors and professors all gather together at one of the campuses for fellowship and planning for the next academic year. It’s a treasured time by these men—one of the highlights of their year.

Like I said, each year a different campus hosts this special event. And this particular year, it was our turn. Part of my job responsibility at that time was to oversee the logistics at the seminary, so the planning and execution of this event naturally fell to me. I needed to find a nice place for them to stay, arrange transportation, figure out meals and menus, organize fellowship events—and the list went on. There were a lot of moving parts and it felt like, to some extent, it was all riding on me.

Now, even though event planning is not my forte, it really wasn’t that big of a deal in the grand scheme of life. It was a few days with a few pastors. But, as the days drew near, something weird and very uncharacteristic started happening to me. I began waking up in the middle of the night, paranoid about my checklist for this event—to the point of cold sweats and a racing heart. As I laid in bed, I went over my list again and again in my mind. I kept envisioning worst-case scenarios and would obsess about contingency plans for all of them. Then, two days before the pastors were supposed to arrive, I found out the large ranch we were renting was one bed short. I had miscalculated! As you can imagine, my anxiety skyrocketed. I felt crushing pressure, and the people closest to me felt its effects. I was short and irritable with my wife, distracted with my kids, and generally aloof when I came home. I felt crushing pressure to facilitate this event with excellence, and the pressure was completely self-induced. “I’ve planned events before,” I thought. “What is happening to me? Why am I obsessing so much about this?”

But for me, this was no ordinary event. It was an event designed by the Lord to draw out a very deep-rooted fear of man. You see, these pastors are the men that trained me, mentored me, and commissioned me. They are, in my eyes, some of the godliest men I know—the men I esteem most in the world. And that means they are also the people I am most tempted to fear. Their experience of our church was, to some extent, riding on my ability to organize this event. I wanted Pastor Bryan to be pleased as we put our best foot forward. And, ultimately, I wanted their approval and esteem for overseeing and executing such a wonderful event.

Yet our Lord was so gracious to me. Just before the event, he opened my eyes to the root issue of the fear of man. I esteemed these men, and rightly so! But I went overboard. In my heart I began to *worship* them. I had placed them over Christ and to my shame was lusting for their esteem, and not the Lord's. The fruit of my life told on me: the anxiety, the sleeplessness, the irritability. Yet, in spite of this idolatry, the Lord was faithful to me and he granted repentance. He helped me identify it, work through it, and take practical steps to put it to death in my life. And, as icing on the cake, he provided an encouraging event for these men.

That's just one example of many in my own life. But, as we wade into this topic, I want you to have a practical illustration of how the fear of man lurks under the surface. The rest of this resource is written to help you, first, understand the problem of the fear of man—to see how it manifests in your own life, if you haven't already. After the first study, you'll likely feel exposed, but that's actually one of the greatest blessings the Lord could give you. Press into the conviction! The Lord loves us enough to help us clearly diagnose what the root issues are, so that we can address them. The second study is aimed to help you understand the core solution, God's antidote, to the fear of man. Surprisingly, as you'll see, the Scriptures tell us to fear the *right Person*. The solution is to fear God, not man. And finally, our third study is aimed at helping you attack the fear of man. It walks you through the steps of confession and repentance, as well as gives some practical helps for developing a plan for change in the church.

## The Problem: Understanding the Fear of Man

This first study seeks to answer three fundamental questions about the fear of man. Initially, “What exactly is the fear of man?” Once we have a working definition, we need to know how it shows up in our lives. So, we ask, “How do I know I struggle with the fear of man?” And finally, we need to be aware of how problematic the fear of man is. So, we ask, “Why is it dangerous to fear man?”

### What is the fear of man?

Before reading any further, try answering that question yourself. Based on your experience, and what you’ve read so far, how would you define what the fear of man is?

When aiming at a definition, it’s helpful to survey some of the key texts on this issue, to see how the Bible talks about it. Our first example of the fear of man is from the gospel of John, where the Jewish authorities were afraid to go public about their faith in Jesus.

“Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for **fear of the Pharisees** they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved **the glory that comes from man** more than the glory that comes from God” (John 12:42-43).

In this text, we learn that the Jewish authorities didn’t want to be put out of the synagogue because they loved receiving glory from men. ‘Glory’ in this context refers to the praises and accolades that come from the folks who held them in high esteem in the synagogue. To follow Christ publicly would’ve cost them their reputations among these men and expulsion from the place they received it: the synagogue. And John tells us they love men’s praise *above* God’s, and as a result were unwilling to follow Jesus publicly. The fear of man kept them from truly trusting Jesus. Men had taken the place of God in their hearts.

The fear of man isn’t just a problem for unbelievers, like the Jewish authorities. Even the apostle Peter fell prey to the fear of man at one point during his ministry. Listen to how Paul recounts this in Galatians 2:

“But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, **fearing the circumcision party**. And the rest of the Jews **acted hypocritically** along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their **hypocrisy**” (Gal. 2:11-13).

Peter was so deceived by the fear of man, he was in danger of denying the gospel. He wanted the approval of a sect of influential Jewish Christians who promoted the circumcision of Gentiles. They looked down on Peter for eating with “uncircumcised” Gentile believers, and likely accused him of becoming impure because of his association with them. Even though he knew better, Peter feared these men because he wanted their approval. So, Paul says, he acted hypocritically. He claimed the gospel cleanses the hearts of the unclean Jew and Gentile alike, yet he separated himself from them implying they were still unclean. So he acted like a hypocrite, denying the very gospel he preached. And he began to lead others astray, too. So, Paul rebuked him for it.

Our Lord himself modeled what it looks like to refuse the fear of man. At one point in his ministry, he said rather bluntly: “I do not receive glory from men” (John 5:41). And people knew it, too. He wasn’t able to be influenced away from his convictions. Even his enemies recognized this and tried to use it against him. In Matthew 22, it says,

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. <sup>16</sup> And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and **you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.** <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” <sup>21</sup> They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” <sup>22</sup> When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away (Matt. 22:15-22).

Although they were trying to trap him with his words, they knew he literally didn’t care about the opinions of others. He wasn’t able to be swayed by people who appeared, from the world’s perspective, important.

But how did Jesus resist these kinds of influences? It’s because he had a *greater fear*. He feared Someone else more than men. Listen to what he tells his disciples:

“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, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” (Luke 12:4-5)

This shows us that Jesus’ greater fear was God himself. Jesus sought to please God and to receive his favor, not people. And he taught his disciples to do the same.

Paul, following Jesus’ perfect example, is also a helpful model for us. Listen to how he describes this concept of the fear of man in two different letters.

For am I now seeking the **approval of man**, or of God? Or am I trying to **please man**? If I were still trying to **please man**, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10).

For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not **to please man**, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with **words of flattery**, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. Nor did we **seek glory from people**, whether from you or from others... (1 Th. 2:4-6).

Again, as we've seen in the texts above, the key question for Paul is, "Whom will you seek to please? Whose approval will you seek? God, or man's?"

Let's try to synthesize what we've seen into a definition. We'll borrow from a few others:

- Puritan Richard Baxter calls it idolizing man or setting man in the place of God. He says our hearts neglect God and prefer some other competitor. It looks like obeying man before God, valuing his favor over God's favor, and fearing his displeasure and rebuke over God's displeasure and rebuke.
- Ed Welch says something similar: "Many of the people I've talked to also had an awakening when they saw the controlling power of other people. They awoke to an epidemic of soul called, in biblical language, 'the fear of man.' Although, they were avowed worshippers of the true God, below the surface they feared other people. That is not to say that they were terrified by or afraid of others (although sometimes they were). 'Fear' in the biblical sense is a much broader word. It includes being afraid of someone, but it extends to holding someone in awe, being controlled or mastered by people, worshipping other people, putting your trust in people, or needing people.... However you put it, the fear of man can be summarized this way: We replace God with people. Instead of a biblically guided fear of the Lord, we fear others."<sup>1</sup>

The world often talks about the fear of man, but it doesn't use that term. Here are two common ways it's talked about in our culture today:

- Codependency – "An excessive reliance on other people for approval and a sense of identity" (Wikipedia).
- Peer Pressure – "the direct influence on people by peers, or the effect on an individual who gets encouraged to follow their peers by changing their attitudes, values or behaviors to conform to those of the influencing group or individual. This can result in either a positive or negative effect, or both" (Wikipedia).

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<sup>1</sup> Edward T. Welch, *When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1997), 14.

## How do I know if I struggle with the fear of man?

Here are a few indicators (adapted from Ed Welch<sup>2</sup> and Lou Priolo<sup>3</sup>). Someone who fears man:

- Is easily influenced by others – Have you ever struggled with “peer pressure”? Do you conform to the desires of those around you, even when you know it’s not the best decision? You likely desire their approval and fear their rejection. This is what the Bible calls the fear of man.
- Struggles to say no – Do you find it hard to say no even when wisdom indicates you should? Are you overcommitted? Often this is motivated by an inordinate desire to please others.
- Makes demands – Do you “need” things from your friends, for them to listen to you, or respect you, or to show you love in a certain way? Is your “love tank” often empty? These kinds of “needs” are actually demands, and they often reveal a desire to be approved by others.
- Fears exposure – Do you ever feel like you might be exposed as an imposter, say at a work meeting, or in a group project? You may alter what you say or say very little in hopes that you won’t be exposed as inferior, or as not up to snuff with everyone else. Why? Likely because you fear them.
- Struggles with decisions – Do you frequently second-guess decisions because of what people might think of you? Or are you paralyzed in decision-making because you can’t please everyone? Your best friend wants you to do X, but your roommate wants you to do Y. You have to let someone down, but you can’t bear the thought, so you vacillate. But why? Likely because you want their esteem, and you fear losing it.
- Shades the truth – Do you lie (especially little white lies)? Or do you shade the truth to make yourself look better, or to cover up shame in front of others? Like Abraham, we often lie because we’re afraid. Afraid of harm, afraid of exposure, afraid of rejection. This is still motivated by the fear of man.
- Is preoccupied with perceptions – Do you frequently talk about your accomplishments in front of others, or story-top? Or maybe you don’t ever talk about yourself out of fear that someone thinks you’re proud. Have you ever been too timid to share the gospel because the unbeliever might think you’re foolish? Are you obsessed with physical fitness, dieting, or weightlifting because you’re consumed with how others view you? Are you easily embarrassed? You may be ruled by the fear of man.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 14–17.

<sup>3</sup> Lou Priolo, *Pleasing People: How Not to Be an “Approval Junkie”* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2007), 23–36.



- Struggles to confront – Do you allow people to perpetually take advantage of you instead of being honest and having the hard conversation? (Peace lover vs. peace-maker). When there is a clear problem that needs to be addressed, would you rather people maintain a good opinion of you instead of honestly and painfully dealing with the problem?
- Responds wrongly to correction – Are you depressed by the critiques of others? Are you defensive? Or maybe you are zealous to correct your mistakes, and work anxiously to please in order to get back in the good graces of whoever you think views you disapprovingly.
- Pretends at church – The church is often a place that is rife with the fear of man. Why do we often pretend everything is okay when it isn't? Why are we hesitant to share our sin struggles with those who could help us? We're often dominated by the opinions of others, and we want to be held in high esteem by them.
- Loves the praises of others – Do you sometimes fish for compliments? Do you put yourself down in the hopes that others will disagree and praise you? When your teacher is praising your group project, do you secretly hope he mentions your name explicitly? Like the Pharisees, our love for the praises of men often reveal that we are not living for the praise of God.
- Shows favoritism – We often play favorites because some people can give us what we want better than others can. Being approved by “important people” makes you feel important, too. We base our value in the assessments of others, which reveals we are living in the fear of man.

Are you able to identify with any of these? If so, which ones are you most prone to and why?

### Why is it dangerous to fear man?<sup>4</sup>

Proverbs 29:25 says, “The fear of man lays a snare...” The idea is that when we fear people above God, we are like an animal caught in a trap. We were baited in, and the bait looked good. But in reality, it's a trap. In other words, fearing people is incredibly dangerous for us. It ensnares us and traps us. It's the opposite of the freedom and joy we find in fearing God.

In light of this, what are some examples of those dangers? It's really important to sink our teeth down into these dangers, because they'll actually motivate us to deal with the sinful fear of man we see in our hearts. We're often deceived thinking that our fear of man isn't that dangerous or destructive; we think it isn't that displeasing to God; we believe it doesn't derail us too much. These are all lies.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Ibid., 51–82.

1. **We are incapable of believing the gospel unless we recognize and repent of our fear of man (John 5:44).**

<sup>44</sup> How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

Here Jesus rebukes those who are trying to kill him (5:18), and tells them they are incapable of believing the gospel because they're so ensnared by the fear of man. If you are consumed by the fear of man, if your life revolves exclusively around the praise of men, Jesus says this lust for man's approval crowds out saving faith.

When Christ comes to us in the gospel, he first exposes us. People who love to be well thought of, people like the Pharisees who love to be viewed as righteous, have to have their hypocrisy exposed before they will come to Christ. We have to repudiate our pride, and come to the Lord seeking his mercy, seeking his righteousness alone. People who love the praises of men, who are enslaved to the opinions of others, won't do this. They won't expose themselves. The Pharisees would rather kill Jesus than humble themselves enough to trust him.

So, the fear of man is dangerous because it prevents unbelievers from trusting in Jesus. It's blinding. And if, as we're going through this study right now, you're realizing you are in this category, that you've loved the praise of men your entire life, and you're rattled by it—praise God! That is very good news. It likely means the Lord is at work in your soul. It's a good indicator that he's opening your eyes to your problem and is working to liberate you from it as you turn to him in faith.

That's an initial danger. But even after we've recognized it, even after the Lord has saved us, we're not completely free from the temptation to fear man. Like Peter, we often slip back into it. So, the second danger is that it renders us incapable of serving.

2. **We are incapable of serving Christ because we are enslaved to the desires of others (Gal. 1:10).**

For am I now seeking the **approval of man**, or of God? Or am I trying to **please man**? If I were still trying to **please man**, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10).

Like we saw earlier, in Gal. 1:10, Paul says if he were still trying to please men, he would not be a servant of Christ. Why? Because they are antithetical. We can only serve one master, not two. One will always take preeminence over the other. And if we live our lives out of the fear of man, we are enslaved to people, and controlled by them instead of by Christ. One author says it like this: "Being a people pleaser is like having a little handle on your back that others can grab hold of to push you and pull you in all directions."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 53.

But Paul tells us this is not what God desires for us. In fact, God has gone to great lengths to free his people from the enslavement to others. In 1 Cor. 7:23, Paul reminds us that we were bought with a price by God himself to be his servants. We should not, therefore, become slaves of men.

When we fear men, one of the dangers is that we are, in actuality, enslaving ourselves to them. But, on the other hand, as we learn to crucify our fear of man, as we learn to live for the glory of God, we become incredibly useful vessels. The Lord will entrust us with more responsibility and will cause our lives to bear glorious fruit (more on this below).

### **3. We risk the loss of eternal reward (Matt. 6:1-6, 16-18).**

In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns us not to “practice our righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them” (Matt. 6:1a). In other words, don’t serve the Lord for the praise of men. Don’t do righteous acts for the admiration of others. Why? “Because,” he says, “then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven” (6:1b).

Being rewarded by Christ is not some carnal motivation in the Bible. It’s actually one of the major motivations in Scripture. Christ’s reward is an eternal reward, one that lasts beyond the grave, into the kingdom, and on into the eternal state. When we pretend that we love the Lord (when in actuality we really love the praise of men), all our obedience isn’t accruing anything for us. It will burn up as wood, hay and stubble, on that final day. This is an incredible motivation to deal with the fear of man in our hearts, isn’t it?

### **4. We open ourselves to other sinful temptations.**

When we fear man, we become so susceptible to other sins. We’re strongly tempted toward flattery, which is saying things we don’t mean, because we want someone’s approval so badly. And we’re also tempted to receive flattery as well. We’re tempted toward crushing anxiety, especially when we’re faced with making a decision that will inevitably let down someone we fear. We’re tempted to choose the wrong kinds of friends who will influence us toward even more sin. And that’s just to name a few.

The goal of highlighting the dangers of the fear of man is that it creates the urgency in us to deal with it. You won’t take chemotherapy until you’ve been convinced you actually have cancer. We won’t commit ourselves to the hard work of mortifying the fear of man unless we see a lot is at stake both now and eternally. Our souls, our usefulness, our reward, and our fruitfulness all hang in the balance.

## What hope is there if I'm consumed with the fear of man?

As we wrap up this first study, I know there's probably been a lot of exposure happening. You're probably seeing sin in your heart at a new level. Every time I study this topic, it's convicting for me, too. But I want to encourage you: when the Lord exposes us and brings conviction, it's because he loves us (Heb. 12:5-11). He's humbling us to show us how much we need him. He's showing us how bad sin really is, how destructive it can be in our lives. Conviction is the first step toward God's better path for us. It's the first step toward knowing his joy. Consider how the author of Hebrews encourages us in this way:

<sup>5</sup> And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
nor be weary when reproved by him.

<sup>6</sup> For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

<sup>7</sup> It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. <sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

God's goal for you in as he exposes your fear of man is for you to experience “the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”

And the glorious news is that, although we are shot through with the fear of man, with the false worship of others, there is one man who never succumbed to this temptation. Christ our Lord never once capitulated in his heart. He never once feared men (John 5:41). And to those of us who have believed in him, his perfect righteousness is credited to us, even to those of us who have idolized the opinions of other creatures above the Creator (Rom. 1). Our God loves you in spite of your idolatry, and he sees Christ's perfect obedience in your place. And, because he is your Father, he will not let his child return back to total enslavement to the fear of man. Even now, he is exposing, convicting, and leading you to repentance. So, rejoice!

Like I said earlier, if you've never breathed the free air of enslavement to Christ, if you've only ever lived completely enslaved to the opinions of others, you can turn from that right now, in this very moment. You can turn to Christ, and he will forgive you and credit you with his perfect righteousness.

## The Antidote: Understanding the Fear of God

In the first study, we look at the problem of the fear of man. That opening study was like the biopsy and bad test results. We tested for the fear of man, and the test came back positive. So now what do we do? Well, that's what we're going to consider in this study. It's the antidote to the fear of man: the fear of God!

Ed Welch wrote a book on this topic. I love the title, because it really captures this concept well. He calls his book, "When People are Big and God is Small." What does that title imply? It implies that we fear man because we inflate the importance and significance of others, and we deflate God. We've exchanged the Creator for the creature. And we insult God by functionally saying that people are more weighty in our hearts than him. We honor people above the Lord. People are big, God is small. But that title also implies the solution doesn't it? We need a robust, biblical vision of God in all his glory, and we need to entrust ourselves to this one true and living God and to what his sovereign word says.

Throughout the Bible, God is constantly reminding us of who he is, and calling his people to fear and trust him above the so-called gods of their day, the little deaf and dumb idols that people fashion for themselves. God calls his people to trust and fear him, not in kings or horses or military might. He calls us not to rely on ourselves, our own wisdom, our own assessments, but in his revelation. God's solution, God's antidote is that we *turn* from our idolatry, our fear of man, and *return* to him, exclusively hoping in and trusting in him as our minds are renewed by his truth. In a word, he calls us to *fear him*.

In Matt. 10:28, Jesus calls his people to fear God, who can destroy both body and soul over men, who can only destroy the body. What's Jesus doing? The threats of men seem ultimate (i.e. people are big), but there is far greater threat to heed, that of the Lord's. When the Lord is exalted in our eyes, we will fear him and obey him above men.

Thus, the antidote to the fear of man is the fear of God. In fact, the Bible presents the fear of God as central to the entire Christian life. One author went so far as to call the fear of God "the soul of godliness,"<sup>6</sup> meaning that it is at the very center of all our growth in the Lord. Ecclesiastes tells us that the fear of God is the whole duty of man (Eccl. 12:13) and Proverbs tell us it's the gateway to wisdom and knowledge (Prov. 9:10; Ps. 111:10). The church is described as walking in the fear of the Lord in the book of Acts (Acts 9:31). In this study, we're going to do our best to unpack this concept by asking and answering three more questions: (1) what is the fear of God, (2) why should I fear God, and (3) how can I better cultivate the fear of God?

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<sup>6</sup> John Murray, "The Fear of God," in *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, n.d.), 229.

## What is the fear of God?

When the Bible talks about the fear of God, it does it from really several vantage points.

1. Faithless Fear of God (vantage point of an unbeliever)

Since the fall, human beings have been totally corrupted by sin and guilt (for an early and shockingly comprehensive statement on our total depravity, see Gen. 6:5). We instinctively know we are evil and we bear guilt as a result. Most of psychology is given to trying to deal (wrongly) with human guilt that results from sin. And when a holy God enters the picture, his sinful creatures are terrified (and rightly so). But instead of running to God for mercy, they hide just like Adam and Eve did (cf. Gen. 3:8). They would rather call for rocks to fall on them than to face the fierce wrath of Christ (Rev. 6:15-16). This is how an unbeliever will respond to the Lord on that final day: with dread and terror and the coming judgment.

This obviously isn't the kind of fear of God we're after, the kind of fear that doesn't repent, but curses God after getting caught and punished for our treason (Rev. 9:20; 16:9, 11). In fact, the Bible talks about unbelievers as not actually fearing God. That's because, ever since the fall, we've been suppressing the truth about God. That's what Paul says in Romans 1 (Rom. 1:18). This kind of truth suppression leads Paul to conclude in chapter three that, for the unbeliever, "there is no fear of God before their eyes" (3:18). So what's the kind of fear of God that we're after?

2. Faith-Filled Fear of God (vantage point of a believer) – What is this kind of fear characterized by?

- a. Comes from God.

Hang with me for a few minutes as I develop this out a bit. It will be worth it. Remember that we just said unbelievers have no true fear of God? Well, throughout salvation history, this was also true of the nation of Israel. They continually failed to have any lasting fear of God, and that lack of fear landed them in exile.

And while they were there, God promised he would send a Messiah who would be characterized by his Spirit *and the fear of God* (Isa. 11:1-4). This Messiah would represent the people, and die for them (Isa. 53), eventually pouring out this Spirit to all of God's people. What does this mean? It means that God would grant his people to fear him, through the empowerment of his Spirit.

That's exactly what we find in another prophet, in Jer. 32:38-41. God says here that the essence of the New Covenant is that his people fear him. He will give

them one heart so they might fear him all their days. In other words, a renewed fear of the Lord comes through the New Covenant.

And that's exactly what we find in the book of Acts. Israel is regathered (Acts 2) and the Spirit is poured out. At the end of that section in Acts 9:31, listen to how the church is described: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied."

- b. Heeds his warnings.

This fear of God hears his gracious warnings about sin and judgment in Scripture, and it heeds those warnings by faith. This is a faith-motivated fear, a fear that hears God's warning and seeks to avoid the consequences of sin and punishment (Ps. 119:120; Acts 5:10; Rom. 11:20; 1 Tim. 5:20).

- c. Repudiates self.

But it doesn't stop here, at merely a dread of punishment and seeking to avoid it. The fear of God drives us to repudiate ourselves, to turn away from ourselves (Prov. 3:5-6).

- d. Depends on his promises.

It also drives us to depend exclusively on his promises of mercy (Ps. 33:18-19; Ps. 40:3). In other words, this faith-filled fear drives us to his *promises*, to humbly depend on them not in ourselves.

- e. Creates more fear.

Ironically, this experience of God's mercy, his full and free forgiveness creates more fear of God (see Ps. 130:3). Psalm 130:3 says God forgives us so that we increase in fear toward him. And that's where this term of fear extends beyond being afraid, to being in absolute awe. To stand in wonder and worship at the holy God, who humbles himself in love to save sinners. We *tremble* with joy (Ps. 2:11; Matt. 28:8) at the thought of God drawing near to us in love and in friendship, as our tender and gracious Father. That's what the Psalmist means when he says God forgives us so that we will fear him in true, joyful, reverent worship. We "esteem his name" (Mal. 3:16).

- f. Results in obedience.

And finally, this kind of fear, this faith-filled fear, will always result in obedience. In other words, obedience is the evidence of the fear of God in someone's heart

(Prov. 14:2; example of Abraham in Gen. 22:12; 2 Cor. 7:1; Col. 3:21). Prov. 14:2 says, “Whoever walks in uprightness [i.e. lives an obedient life] fears the Lord, but he who is devious in his ways despises him.” We’ve got to be careful here. Our obedience (or disobedience) shows us how much we really fear the Lord, no matter what we say with our lips (Isa. 29:13-14). We can claim we fear the Lord, but if we’re riddled with secret sin, the reality is—we don’t fear him.

Let’s sum it up and answer our first question a little more succinctly. What’s the fear of God, the one we’re after? Toward a definition: The fear of God is **the attitude of the heart that takes God seriously**. It’s rattled by his warnings, and depends on his promises, and obeys his commands. In a word, the fear of the Lord is an attitude of humble faith.

### Why should I fear God?

1. If you don’t fear God, you’ll suffer for it now and eternally as an unbeliever (Prov. 24:21-22). In the end, everyone will fear the Lord (Ps. 102:15) and bow in submission to him, either in judgment (Prov. 1:29) or in salvation. “I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations” (Mal. 1:13).
2. The fear of God is the entrance point to all of God’s wisdom and knowledge (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10).
3. All the benefits of an intimate covenant relationship are for those who fear the Lord, benefits such as friendship with God (Ps. 25:14); steadfast love (Ps. 103:11, 17); compassion (103:13), protection and provision (34:7, 9; 111:5); life, satisfaction, wealth and honor (Prov. 14:27; 19:23; 22:4); and confidence in life (Prov. 14:26).
4. Life now is eternally fruitful and full of purpose for the one who fears the Lord (Ps. 112:1; 115:13). As an example, consider what the Scriptures promise to the homes that fear the Lord. For the husband and father, his work and family will flourish spiritually as he fears the Lord and extends that fear to those under his care (Ps. 128:1, 4). For the wife and mother, her husband, children and covenant community will flourish as she fears the Lord (Prov. 31:10-31, esp. v. 30).
5. The fear of God crucifies our fear of man and fills us with confidence in God (Ps. 27:1, 3).

### How can I grow in the fear of God?

If you’re a believer, the great news is that God has already planted his fear in your heart (Jer. 32:38-41). Before conversion, we had no true fear of God (Rom. 3:18). But now, according to Jeremiah 32, God has caused us to fear him. Jerry Bridges compares this fear to a spark that God



himself ignites. We can the flame of fear, but God is the one who caused the initial spark.<sup>7</sup> That said, there are very clear ways to increase our fear of the Lord. We will go more in depth in our final study, but for now, consider two of these incredibly power ways the Bible says we grow in fearing God.

### By Knowing, Believing, and Practicing Truth

As basic as it sounds, understanding and believing what the Bible says about God, about his mighty deeds, about his promises to those who trust him, about his warnings if we don't—in all these ways the Bible, as truth, teaches us to fear God. Here are a few examples.

- When God manifested himself to Israel at Sinai, notice what he told them: “Gather all the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so” (Deut. 4:10). God spoke his words to them, and his words were intended to teach them to fear him.
- One of my favorite examples is found in what Israel's kings are commanded to do immediately after they are enthroned in Deuteronomy 17:18-20:

<sup>18</sup> And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. <sup>19</sup> And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, <sup>20</sup> that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

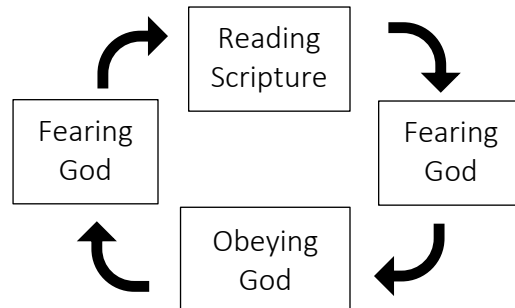
God tells the king to write out his own personal (and accurate!) copy of God's word. He tells him to carry it around and read it all the time! Why? So that he may learn to fear the Lord his God. Simply reading Scripture is a way to grow in your fear of God. How does that work? When we read the Bible with faith, believing it, we come to see what God is really like as he reveals himself to us. And when God reveals himself to humans, they fear him in humble worship (Ex. 34:5-8; Luke 9:28-36). We hear his warnings, which often run contrary to everything our hearts feel. We come to know his promises. We learn of God's interactions with humans, and what pleases him and what doesn't. We learn of his mighty deeds—deeds like creation (Ps. 96:4-5), the exodus (Ex. 14:31), the conquest of Canaan (Josh 4:24; Ps. 47:2), Christ's works (Mark 4:41 after the calming of the storm; Luke 7:16), the cross and resurrection (Matt. 28:8), which are all fear-inducing. Thus, simply reading the Bible and believing it will deepen our fear of God.

But if we go back to the Deuteronomy 17 example above, notice that reading it isn't the only thing the king is told to do. It's the first step, but the king will continue to grow in

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<sup>7</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Joy of Fearing God*, 1st ed. (Colorado, Springs, Colo: WaterBrook Press, 2004), 119.

the fear of God as he *obeys* God: “that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them” (17:19). The king reads in order to obey, and in so doing learns to fear the Lord. This means that, as we come to act on what we know about God (rather than what we feel), we will actually grow in the fear of God. How so? We are confirming that what we see in Scripture is actually true when we act on it. Our faith-filled obedience deepens our convictions about God, especially when obedience costs us something. This kind of costly obedience cements the fear of God in our hearts. And the cycle continues (see the diagram below).



### By Diligently Seeking God in Prayer

Another way the fear of God grows in the believer’s heart is, again, very simple and yet often neglected: by prayer! As we diligently seek the Lord for an increase of this fear, he is glad to give it.

- In Psalm 86:11, David asks the Lord for this increase of fear:

“Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name.”

- David’s son, Solomon, likewise encourages us to call out to God for insight that leads to fear:

“Yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom...” (Prov. 2:3-6).

A passionate pursuit of insight from God, this text says, leads to understanding what it means to really fear God and know him. This pursuit includes, quite simply, asking God for it. Raising your voice. Begging him to reveal himself to you. And, this text assures us, God will always answer this kind of prayer by pouring out abundant wisdom.

Thus, throughout Scripture we see that the fear of God grows in our hearts as God reveals himself to us through his word and in answer to prayer. But we also need to add one more very

important way this fear grows. We grow in the fear of God as we involve ourselves in the life of the local church.

### **By Involving Yourself in the Life of the Church**

At our conversion, God saves us into his body—the church. He has designed the church in such a way as to mature us into full Christlikeness (see Eph. 4:7-16). So, if he wants us to grow in fearing him, then we should expect we will grow in this virtue as we embed ourselves fully in the local church. But how might we grow in the fear of God by investing in the church? Consider a few ways:

- When we involve ourselves in the church, we hear God’s words proclaimed from individuals God has gifted and raised up particularly for that purpose (Eph. 4:11-12). When God’s word is taught and believed, we grow in fearing him. Even other members will come alongside you and encourage you and disciple you with truth (Eph. 4:25), thus increasing your fear of God.
- Additionally, we pray for each other in the church (Acts 2:42). Through the church’s prayers, then, you will grow in the fear of God. When we involve ourselves in the life of the church, the pastors and other members pray for us, and one result of this prayer, like we saw above, is an increase in fear.
- Another interesting example is that of church discipline. When we watch others harden under the word and, sadly, they end up being disciplined out of the church because of their failure to repent, one result of this discipline is an increase of the fear of God in the church (Acts 5:11; 1 Tim. 5:20). We realize that God is not mocked and that he desires purity in his church. Thus, we are stimulated all the more to repent of sin ourselves and live more fully for his glory. This is the fear of God at work in the body.

Our fear increases as the church gathers and ministers to one another. This is why the church is described as “walking in the fear of the Lord” in Acts 9:31. The church of Christ is characterized by the fear of Christ as we worship, trust and obey him. So, if you wholeheartedly commit to the church, you can expect that God will use his church to deepen this fear in your heart.

The fundamental antidote to the sinful fear of man is fearing God more. There are a lot more practical things we will talk through in the third study. We will think through how to battle the fear of man specifically. But the main takeaway from this study is this: when *God* is big, *people* are small. So, fear him!

## The Strategy: Battling the Fear of Man

In this third and final study, our goal is to develop a strategy to fight the fear of man in our lives. In the previous study, we learned that we need to be proactively cultivating the fear of God. As God reveals to us who he truly is in response to seeking him by prayer, we will grow in this fear. And growing in fearing the *right* Person, the Lord Jesus, is the most fundamental way to lay an axe to the root of the sinful fear of man. In addition to this, what are some other practical helps the Bible gives us in battling the fear of man? In this study, we'll lay out six of those helps.

When your conscience is inflamed, the Lord has moved in and unearthed some serious fear of man in your heart, and you're under conviction in a particular area, what do you do? Well, the Biblical authors tell us what *not to do* with our sin, and *what to do*. Listen to these passages and see if you can spot them:

Prov. 28:13: "Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy."

Ps. 32:3-5: "For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. // I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin."

1 John 1:8, 10: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

What are we told not to do? These authors tell us *not* to conceal our transgressions! We're told not to keep silent about them, not to cover our iniquity, not to pretend we don't have sin. And the positive? We're told to confess our sin. Acknowledge it to God and to others. So, let's explore that first help of what not to do.

### Help #1: Don't conceal your sinful fear of man (Prov. 28:13; Ps. 32:3-5; 1 John 1:8-10).

You and I need to realize that we are powerfully tempted to conceal our sin. But what might this look like? How might we be tempted to conceal or cover our transgressions in this area?

1. By ignoring it. (Pretending nothing is wrong before the Lord or others.)

It's tempting in these fear of man situations to just straight up ignore the sinfulness of it. In my life, it sometimes takes me a while to realize that I am fearing man in a particular area, and it takes me a while because I've been ignoring the warning signs. So, as I go

before the Lord, I may pray about a particular situation but never acknowledge that I'm actually in sin, as I sinfully care more about what they think of me than what the Lord thinks of me. But here's the reality: if you're fearing man in your heart, and living for men and not the Lord, but you refuse to admit it (i.e. you ignore it), that's a form of covering your sin. There's no freedom there.

2. By minimizing it. (Acknowledging there's a problem, but you minimize the *sinfulness* of it.)

Let's say you're struggling to confront someone. You know you really need to do it because they're on a really bad path, but you say, "I'm just one of those people who really doesn't like conflict." Ok...what does that imply? Your temperament, i.e. the way God made you, is the real reason why you can't be obedient. Notice what you're not saying. You're not saying, "Wow, I'm unwilling to confront my friend because I'm *idolizing them right now*, because I'm *sinfully fearing their response* more than I fear the Lord." That would be more accurate. Instead, you're trying to minimize the sinfulness of your response by saying, "I just don't like conflict." According to Scripture, that's a form of covering our sin. And here's the reality, beloved: we'll miss all of God's blessings on the other side if we keep doing this.

3. By blame-shifting. (Placing blame on someone or something outside yourself.)

When the Lord exposes fear of man in your life, and you immediately seek to place the blame somewhere else other than yourself. If someone else confronts you and you're quick to point out the sin in their life as a reason for not being exposed yourself, this is blame shifting, a form of covering your sin.

Another way we shift blame is by relabeling our sin with some other unbiblical label. Like saying we have a self-esteem deficiency instead of a fear of man problem. It implies our core problem isn't actually sinful self-worship, but something (or someone) else. "You all out there haven't esteemed me enough, and that's why I'm struggling." Who's at fault? You people out there, not me! We're shifting blame in that moment.

4. By self-atoning for it. (Punishing yourself in some way in order to feel better about yourself afterward.)

We're tempted toward this when we realize we've sinned, maybe the Lord has exposed a deep-rooted fear of man issue in your life, and you immediately and frantically rush to "fix it." It's like you noticed there was some lettuce in your teeth and you quick try to pick it out before anyone else notices. You may feel like you have to prove yourself to God, that you're really repentant, or that he's mad at you and you need to let him cool down a bit before you go to him. All these are forms of trying to atone for yourself, for your own sin. It essentially amounts to a denial of Christ's atonement for you. I know it

sounds alarming when we say it like that, but we've got to realize that's what's happening when we respond this way.

And it's important to note that this response is also rooted in pride. We say, "I was perfect before this, but now I see I've got a problem, so I've got to quick fix it so I can get back to being good." Instead, we've got to realize we were never good. And what God has exposed in our hearts isn't even the half of it. We desperately need *mercy* from him, atonement from him. We can't atone for ourselves at all—only he can provide what we need. We do want to address the sin, but we don't want to do it apart from his mercy.

So that's just a brief sketch on some ways we're tempted to conceal our sin, as the Proverbs say. So, if we shouldn't do that, what should we do? What is the biblical response when we're convicted about the fear of man?

**Help #2: Confess your sinful fear of man (Prov. 28:13; Ps. 32:3-5; 1 John 1:8-10).**

The essence of confession is simply this: we take full ownership of sin. We are convinced of the sinfulness of sin (its evil) and we agree with God's assessment of it. We also agree with where it came from: our hearts and nothing else. My circumstances didn't cause it. People don't cause it. My own heart generated it; the circumstances merely apply the pressure that expose my own heart.

Jesus tells us that all sin bubbles up out of our hearts (Mark 7:21, 23). This means we are completely responsible because all sin comes from within us. The circumstances may tempt us to sin, but we do the sinning ourselves. A great foil to us is the Lord Jesus. When he was crushed by his circumstances, righteousness came out of his heart—not sin. That's because our circumstances aren't the ultimate *cause* of our sin—our hearts are.

This same reality is echoed by Paul in Rom. 1:25. In that passage, Paul says we sin because we've exchanged the truth of God for a lie. We exchanged true worship for false worship. Remember, when we fear people, we're idolizing them. We're worshiping them above God. So, we need to admit it to God and others. We need to take full responsibility for it (see Daniel's representative prayer for the nation in Dan. 9:3-19 for a great example in taking full responsibility for sin.).

This kind of admission is extremely humbling, but get this: it's at least half the battle when it comes to fighting sin in our lives. Why is that? Because this kind of humble admission *drives us* to the mercy of God as our only hope. We can't hope in any of our own righteousness, because it *isn't there!* We don't just say we come to the cross empty handed, we know it painfully by experience. God has proven it to us.

As a result of taking full responsibility for our fear of man, we grow in humility. We come back to him, again and again as these recurring fears arise, requesting mercy and help in the same area.

We never get beyond needing him. And even when he gives us patterned obedience in an area, we talk about the “victories” with fear and trepidation, giving all glory to God for any visible fruit in our lives!

If you’ve been convicted in our study on the fear of man, have you actually confessed this sin accurately to the Lord? Have you admitted that you’re the only one to blame here and that you desperately need his mercy alone? If you haven’t yet, do it now. The beauty of this is that God *promises* to forgive that kind of humble request. So that means, we need to actually lay hold of those promises, which brings us to our second biblical help.

[Help #3: Appropriate God’s promises of forgiveness and change \(Prov. 28:13; Ps. 32:3-5; 1 John 1:8-10\).](#)

For those people who stake everything on Christ, for those who come to Christ full of sin and treason, but coming in humble faith, God’s promise is breathtaking. He promises to *abundantly* pardon. And the Lord wants us to *trust* those promises.

### **Promises of Forgiveness**

The Bible gives us so many examples of this, but even the Biblical authors sometimes struggle for metaphors here. One of the most striking parables is the heart of the father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). This father, who has been shamed and mistreated by his arrogant son, whose resources have been squandered in sin, this father only cares about the wellbeing of this sinful son. The moment he sees his son returning, he runs out to meet him, he embraces him, clothes him with the best garments, and celebrates his homecoming. It’s a metaphor of God’s disposition toward the repentant sinner. And he is *overjoyed every single time* you repent. He abundantly pardons. His love for you doesn’t change; it doesn’t wax and wane; it doesn’t increase or diminish. His love is constant, fixed, and eternal.

But how can this be? Even when we’ve idolized others above the Lord? When we’ve claimed to worship him but have in secret been living for praise of others? Because his forgiveness of you isn’t based on you. He can forgive freely and justly because of what Christ has done for his people. All the wrath that you deserve from God for your idolatry has been poured out on Christ. The Bible’s word for this is propitiation (Rom. 3:25)—the wrath absorber. All of your fear of man has been punished in Christ, and all that remains for you is total pardon, total favor in the eyes of the Father. You are clothed with the very robes of Christ’s righteousness. That’s how abundant his forgiveness is.

Yet we sometimes, in pride, think that it’s too presumptuous to depend that freely on his mercy, especially when we’ve come under intense conviction for sin. But the Lord is the one making the promise, and he always makes good on his promises.

So, we need to appropriate these promises as we come to him confessing our sin. Let your heart be refreshed by his promises of full pardon, full cleansing, full restoration of the relationship as you come admitting your sin. We may not always *feel* forgiven after we confess, but remember: our feelings don't change the realities described in God's word. We must choose to believe the promises in these moments, even if they seem too good to be true (cf. Isa. 55:6-9<sup>8</sup>).

### Promises of Change

Not only has he promised forgiveness, but he's also promised to change us. He will complete the work he started in us (Phil. 1:6). He will see to it that we are trained and disciplined to share in his holiness (Heb. 12:3-11). He will work every single circumstance in our lives together for good in conforming us to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28-29). These passages are so important for us to know well, to rehearse back to God in the moments of struggle, especially as we come to him in our more "besetting" sin areas like the fear of man.

And the really wild thing that we saw in the last study is that as we experience God's forgiveness in salvation, and again and again as we come to him as his children, this experience of his mercy creates more of that reverential fear in our hearts, doesn't it (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ps. 130:3; Ps. 34:8-9)? His patience endears me to him, it makes me stand in awe of him, it humbles me to the dirt. It makes me all the more grieved when I sin against him, and motivates me to be faithful to him in return. Have you ever deeply betrayed someone, one of your friends or someone close to you? And did that friend abundantly pardon you at great cost to themselves? What did that do to you? Did it not make you respect them and want to be loyal to them? That simple little human example can't even begin to compare to what the Lord has done for us. These are the first steps in how we begin to repent of the fear of man. But there's more.

### Help #4: Ask for his help in uniting your heart (Ps. 86:11).

I know we looked at this briefly in the previous study, but the psalmist actually asks the Lord to unite his heart to fear his name. "Bring my heart together Lord, to fear you only. I know I'm tempted, I can feel it, to fear these other people, to fear this circumstance above you, but I want to fear you. So please, unite my fickle heart to fear you alone." That's the idea.

Prayer humbles me in these scenarios, and I'm often even more humbled at my lack of simple requests for his help. Prayer is a very clear reminder that all change and empowerment come directly from his throne. And it reminds me that God has told me to come to him to ask him for these things, with the promise that he will provide them for me (Luke 11:9-10). I think we will be surprised, when we get to the kingdom, to see just how much God answered these weak

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<sup>8</sup> This is an incredible passage, where God promises to abundantly pardon transgressors who simply repent and call to him. It's as though the Lord anticipates this free pardon to shock us, so he reminds us that his thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways. He is altogether different than us. We humans might not forgive that lavishly and freely, but God does. We must be careful not to judge the Lord based on our own standards.



prayers. How many of our desires did he alter? How much unnoticed help did he actually supply? All because we simply and humbly asked.

The Bible continues to give us help as we think about growing out of sin patterns like the fear of man, and it doesn't *only* tell us to pray. It also tells us to actively do things, like fight lies and renew our minds (Eph. 4:22-24), kill sin (Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5), and actually forsake our sin (Prov. 28:13). God empowers us as we put in the effort. That's where the fifth biblical help comes in.

Help #5: Create a battle-plan for mind-renewal and change (Eph. 4:22-24; Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5; Prov. 28:13).

"Battle-plan" is war language. Remember, the fear of man is a snare. It detracts from God's glory and our usefulness. It's impossible to fear man and be a servant of Christ. So, we've got to go to war against it. The Lord will help us, but we've got to battle. You can make this plan by yourself, but it's even more effective when you can do this with a comrade in the faith, a mentor or discipler or faithful friend (esp. if you're new in the faith and at battling sin). Here are a few items that go into a "battle plan." I would encourage you to take some time and fill it out.

1. Isolate the circumstances. When are you most tempted to fear man? What happens? What's the "bad fruit"?
2. Reflect on your heart. What's going on inside you in those moments? What do you want in this situation? What are you telling yourself (i.e. the reel playing in your mind)? What's motivating you, as far as you can tell (it may be murky, but that's ok)? What are you trying to achieve?
3. Evaluate those thoughts and motives with Scripture. What would Scripture say to your thoughts? Can you identify any lies that you're running to? What truths are you ignoring that you need to believe? Where are those truths found in the Bible? What's your daily plan to get real familiar with those truths?

4. Plan for obedience. What would it look like to fear God (obedience) more than man in the situation? What should you think, say, and/or do in the situation that would bring maximal glory to God? Does God's word speak directly to that situation? Are there any other Biblical principles that come to bear in that situation? Any direct commands? What could you do that would most crucify the fear of man in your heart? What could you do that would cultivate the fear of God in that circumstance? What new and beautiful fruit is available to me if I obey?

Once you've got a plan, or even the start of a plan in place, that's where this sixth and final help comes in. You've got to act on what you know in the moments of temptation.

[Help #6: Learn to live in Christ's presence<sup>9</sup> and yield your will to him in moments of temptation \(Ps. 16:8; Ps. 139 cf. Luke 22:42\).](#)

### **Living in the Presence of Christ**

One of the greatest motivations to truly repenting of the fear of man is remembering that you live constantly in the Messiah's holy presence, with his watchful eye. And we have to cultivate this awareness. David models this for us in Ps. 16:8, when he says, "I have set the Lord always before me." David's not saying he physically put the Lord somewhere that he wasn't before. What David is saying is that he lives his life consciously recognizing that the Lord is with him always and that he lives in his presence. David's greatest poem on this theme is Psalm 139, where he describes the Lord as intimately present, aware of all his movements, intentions and thoughts, even before David himself thinks them!

This awareness of the presence of the Lord is a strong motivation for obedience. Think about when you've been tampering with sin. You thought you were alone, but someone walks in. Out of fear *of man*, your behavior immediately changes, doesn't it? What if we realized, more constantly, that the holiest Being that exists—the Lord—is right here, seeing every motive of our heart?

Outside of Christ, that's absolutely terrifying. A sovereign and holy God knows everything about me and will judge me for every evil intention of my heart. However, because I am in Christ, the Lord's presence is his *favorable* presence. He is drawing near to me as his child, to help me. And

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<sup>9</sup> For a compelling chapter describing living in the presence of God, see, "Chapter 3: Ingredients of the Fear of God," in Albert Martin, *The Forgotten Fear: Where Have All the God-Fearers Gone?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), Kindle.

seeing that he is intimately involved in every detail of my life motivates me to yield my will to him even in moments where he appears to be absent.

## Yielding Your Will

But what exactly does “yielding my will” mean? When I am tempted with the fear of man, the pressure is strong. It’s easy to give into it. In fact, I *want* to give into it. My emotions are tangled up and, to follow them would mean giving into the fear of man. Instead of following how we feel in that moment, we need to do something else. We need to act on what we know to be true. We need to actively renew our mind in that moment, and pray something like this: “Lord, everything inside me wants to cave to this pressure to fear man, to say yes to something I know would displease you. I desperately want them to think well of me, so I’m tempted to sin against you. I know it’s wrong. I know that you are more important and that you want me to fear you above this person. So, I’m going to trust you, and tell that person no.” That’s what it looks and sounds like to *yield your will* to Christ’s will in the moment of temptation. You’re bringing yourself in submission to Christ. You’re acting on what you know to be true, irrespective of how you feel in the moment. That’s what Paul means when he says we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). We live our lives trusting Christ’s words, not what we feel or think in ourselves. And true faith always produces active obedience (James 2:14-26).

So, in those moments where you are most tempted to fear man, remember: the Lord is with you. He is present, watching, and offering help. In that moment, resign your will to his, like Jesus did in the garden, and obey him by faith. Work the plan that you’ve made. And when you sin, when you falter and fear man again, repeat the process. Run to the Father who loves you, owning your sin and seeking his mercy. Gain assurance, and go back over the battle plan, making any tweaks or adjustments as you gain more insight into your heart. Go back to your friends and disciplers and fight the good fight alongside them. As you learn more of Christ, you will grow in fearing him. Pretty soon, you’ll see the Spirit start producing some incredible fruit in your life over time.

## Additional Reading

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