

THE FEAR OF GOD
by Lester J. Start
Undated

Text: Proverbs 1:7a. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”

The Bible shows itself as the great book which it is in the way it gives us in a few words truths which spread out over a world of ideas. As we read the Bible, we come across those mighty peaks in the long range of lofty thoughts which open up a new vision of eternal truth, in such a way that it seems impossible to exhaust all of the truth within them. Among these mighty texts of the Bible is my text for this morning and for last week: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Last week we tried to show how our modern learning and outlook on life are inadequate to guide us to the good life because we have forgotten this fundamental truth that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. We have forgotten to guide our progress according to the laws of God; as we emancipated ourselves from ecclesiastical control in everyday life, following the beacon of freedom, we have tended to think we can emancipate ourselves from God, and our freedom has led us to trouble and grief because we have allowed it to change into license, anarchy with only a vestigial semblance of moral control.

Today let us think on this text from another point or vantage and ask ourselves what sort of God this thought implies, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. What does it mean to fear the Lord and what sort of God is it that we must fear? This idea of fearing the Lord seems strange to us today when we have been taught that love is the attitude we should feel toward God. This idea of fear, we feel, has been changed in the New Testament so that we can look to God with a feeling of love toward God as a Father. We should love, not fear the Lord, we say. And this is right in a sense, Jesus has given us the idea of God as a heavenly Father, and the old Hebrew idea of God as a stern Judge whom we should fear has been changed. But we forget that this idea of God as love is a deeper revelation of God which does not contradict but fulfills the idea of God which the Hebrews held. God is none the less a God of judgment, a God who requires of man righteousness and morality. But Jesus added to this concept the idea of a God of love who helped his children to regain their footing when they have stumbled from his path. He never told us, however, that because God was a God of love, we did not have to follow his requirements. These are still binding, and when we neglect them, we find the sternness that is the result of our actions. It seems, however that we have lost sight of this idea of God. By emphasizing the love of God, we have softened the requirements of God. , thinking that because He is such a loving Spirit we do not have to worry about our shortcomings and sins, for He will abundantly forgive. And so we go on our happy way; not at all concerned with the kind of lives we are leading because we know that God loves us and will forgive us when we err. The very idea of sin is foreign to many people, and an attitude of fear as a result of some evil act we have committed toward God is entirely unknown, because God is love and there is no need to fear. We are like the child of indulgent parents who soon learns to size up his mother and father, and says when he is about to embark upon an adventure he knows is wrong, “Oh, they won’t care”,— because he knows that his mother won’t punish him. So we consciously or unconsciously in varying degrees have put God way off somewhere, as a big white genial blur, and go merrily

about our affairs without considering his will, because we think he doesn't really care what we do because He loves us so.

We need to be reminded that we cannot get away with this manner of thinking about God; we need to remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. When the ancient Hebrews said this they did not think of fear in the sense of abject terror in the face of a ruthless threatening power. The Hebrew word has none of this connotation. It means rather a feeling of reverence and respect before God. Fearing the Lord means holding him in honor and reverence, recognizing his power and authority as Lord of the universe. And it means something more; it is the attitude they felt when they thought of God as infinitely good and recognized their shortcomings in the face of this perfection. It was a constant awareness of the ideal of God which served not as an unattainable goal of conduct, but an immediate practical requirement. The idea of the love of God was not foreign to the Hebrews either. In the great prophets we read of the love of God for those who keep his commandments. But the Hebrews with their strong moral consciousness stressed the feeling of reverence toward this infinitely good God who demanded moral perfection by his sheer goodness. The idea of love is still basic however. It is the kind of love which one feels for something he values so highly, that it must work a change in his own heart, and make him try to match the perfection he senses with awe and reverence. It is the same attitude which is expressed in the highest expressions of love on the human level, where the lover feels he must labor to match the perfection he sees in the one he loves.

We have gotten away from this idea of the fear of the Lord as a feeling of deep reverence toward him as we have emancipated ourselves from dependence upon him, feeling that we are sufficient unto ourselves because we are so clever in manipulating nature. We have toned down the stern requirements of God, emphasizing his love instead, a love that always forgives so that we do not have to worry if we follow his requirements or not. Rather than follow his commandments in all that we do, we turn to him only when the tares we have sown in our lives threaten to choke out what we value, and then we expect God to pull them out for us without any effort on our part. The idea of punishment for our sins has long been forgotten; we cannot think of God as being so mean as to hold us responsible for them. We think back on the old days when preachers talked about hell-fire and damnation with cynical amusement, for we feel we have freed ourselves from this possibility. If someone were to preach a sermon like those of Jonathan Edwards today, he would hardly be taken at all seriously. And yet this man, Jonathan Edwards, who constantly preached about sinners in the hands of an angry God, is perhaps the greatest mind that this country has ever produced. He was no fool whose opinions may be considered worthless. And we must recognize that when people were constantly reminded of the stern requirements of God, they led better Lives than they do today when we have emancipated ourselves from all such unpleasant thoughts that God requires something of us to merit his love.

Our toning down the moral requirements of God is all a part of our modern trend to emancipate ourselves from all control. By putting Him way off somewhere where we can turn to Him only when we want to, only when we need Him, we feel we can carry on our ordinary lives without worrying about Him for He is too kind to harm us. I am reminded of the famous atheist, Bob Ingersoll, who used to terrify lecture audiences by defying God. He would take out his watch and shout, "If there is a God I challenge him to strike me dead with a thunderbolt; I give him five

minutes,” And he would count off the time on his watch while the audience grew more and more uneasy, some fearful souls fleeing in panic, expecting a great show of fireworks because of this impious scoundrel. But when the five minutes were up and no thunderbolts were forthcoming Ingersoll and much of his audiences felt he had made his point, forgetting that this is not the way God makes his judgments. It must have been a pitifully amusing spectacle to God on high to see this puny man defying the powers he could not understand.

There have been many however who have been impressed with similar arguments. For example, the scientist scans the skies and reports that there is no heaven or hell. They show how it would be impossible to ascend to heaven because of the terrific speed at which the earth revolves about its axis. And so we tend to think that there is no judgment for our actions. But this argument is of value only to those who would deny the existence of God because they cannot see him. If there is no hell as traditionally pictured, we can see that man still reaps [light and darkness] judgement for his actions by the hell he makes in his own life. And who is to say what will be the situation after death? Many who are secure and happy in their sins may awaken after the last sleep to find the flames licking about their shoulders, if not literally fire, a mental suffering which may be worse. The hard fact is that we cannot get away with violating the rules of God; by ignoring them we do not destroy them; they are still binding. The man who leads a life of dissipation must awaken to the grim result of a diseased body and conscience. The one who leads a life of selfishness finds himself without friends or respect. The consequences of our actions follow us inevitably, and it is as true today as it was then Paul first expressed the idea, that as we sow, so shall we reap.

In ancient times there was a unique punishment for anyone who broke the moral law and took the life of someone else in society. The body of the slain was chained to the guilty man, so that wherever he went he had to drag the rotting corpse with him as a constant reminder of his crime. By the time the body had rotted away the enormity of his crime was terribly impressed upon the mind of the guilty. This is a wickedly cruel punishment, but it only makes realistic the nature of guilt, which chains itself to the evil man and follows him with the consequences of his evil actions. Shakespeare describes the psychological effects of guilt in much the same way in his great tragedy Macbeth, as he describes how the guilt of Lady Macbeth haunted her so that she could not wash her hands clean of the bloodstains she imagined were on her hands. She could not wash away her guilt.

This morbid description of guilt is dangerous in that it exaggerates the enormity of evil acts to a point where the evil doer feels that there is no way out of his trouble. Modern psychiatry has properly shown the dangers of this type of exaggerated thinking. Jesus healed by forgiving But on the other hand we have tended to err in the other direction by thinking that we do not have to consider the consequences of our actions, that we need never feel a sense of guilt, that it makes little difference what we do so long as we do not bother ourselves with a morbid sense of guilt. Our error lies in the fact that we cannot ignore the consequences of our actions, for they inevitably lead to results which affect ourselves and others in a harmful manner.

The ancient Hebrews believed that all suffering in the world is the consequence of man's sin. That is why they were so zealous in following the will of God in all that they did, for they knew

that if they violated His will they would harm themselves and others. Perhaps they exaggerated this cause for suffering; certainly there are many examples of suffering we all can think of which do not seem to involve any moral implications. For example, whose sin is responsible for natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, and plagues of disease striking innocent people? Jesus tackled this problem when some Pharisees asked him whose sin was responsible for a certain man being born blind; he suggests that no one sinned, but that the evil exists to show the power of God in overcoming it. As we look at the suffering in the world, however, I think that we would agree with the Hebrews that most of it is the result of man's own actions. We cause starvation by exploiting the poor, we breed wars by living selfishly gaining as much as we can for ourselves. We encourage disease by allowing unsanitary slums, and so on. Life may have its discordant notes, as Jesus suggests, notes which are not caused by the wrong-doing of men. In the same way a symphony contains discords which when resolved aid to the beauty and grandeur of the music. But we must realize that the worst notes we hear in symphonies sometimes are not in the music, but are caused by the errors of the musicians. And so in life the greatest discords and sufferings are caused by man.

These are the considerations which make me feel that we must consider seriously our idea of God as a power who demands something of us, a God who demands that we walk in righteousness according to his moral requirements, a God whose will and requirements are absolute so that we cause ourselves and others suffering when we violate them. In thinking of God as a God of love we must not tone down these requirements, but remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. The love of God is not destroyed by this emphasis; on the contrary it gives the love of God more meaning, just as we have more respect for a parent's love which demands obedience in his children according to what is right, than the love which means mere indulgence. We must not let our idea of God's love mean a similar indulgence, for this is not the heavenly love of God that Jesus taught.

[Jesus(?) Versus God]

God as revealed in the life of Jesus is a God of infinite tenderness and love and mercy. But we must not forget that there is another side in the character of Jesus which is more severe. There must have been many people in the company of Jesus would say, he is an austere man. This severity was in no way antagonistic to his gentleness, for there are times when it is not really being kind to be kind; there are times when it is cruel to be gentle. And so the severity of Christ is like the shadows which deepen the beauty of the hills; it gives to his character the depth and dignity and power and permanence which has meant the redemption of man. Consider the note of severity in these statements from Jesus who taught of the infinite love of God. "If thy right hand offend thee cut it off, for it is better that one of thy members perish than that thy whole body should be cast into hell". "If any man come after me and hate not his father and mother, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." "And whosoever doth not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." There never was a more severe moral teaching than this which demands so much of people. And consider how sternly Christ judged the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes. He knew that wrong must be condemned, in order to teach people the right; he knew that the ruins must be cleared away before the palace can be built. It was not

because he hated that he condemned them; it was because he loved these lost sheep and knew that only by turning away from evil could they find God.

The love of God demands the good life in us; that is why we must constantly remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. His love is at hand to help us when we stumble from his path; but to stay on the path we must turn aside from wrong doing and follow his requirements.

[Catechism heaven of "power with God" Original sin]

I have deliberately chosen this subject, because I think it is a word we need today to hear. You may not like it; you probably do not, but then I am not here to preach what people like to hear. We have tended to emancipate ourselves from considering the stern requirements of God, by thinking of him only as a benign spirit who comes to our aid when we feel we need him. We need to remind ourselves that this infinitely loving God, even as revealed in our Lord, can be rigorous, stern and severe. His love is endless; his gentleness is infinite, but we dare not forget that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Our Father who art in Heaven we come to Thee to worship at thy shrine and offer up to Thee as incense prayers to thy name. We thank Thee O God for the truth and beauty and goodness of the universe which because it is from Thee can never die, even when man would soil thy beauty and drag thy truth and goodness in the dust. We thank thee for the beauty of the sunset sky which lifts our vision after a long day, for the nevertheless of faith which teaches us that thy truth is right even when we seem alone in standing by thy truth, and for thy goodness reflected in the world about us everywhere which cheers the lonely and unhappy spirit.

Help us O God to develop a keener awareness of Thy presence in the world about us; help us to see behind the confusion and chaos of man-made evils to the rock foundation of Thy peace; to feel underneath the senseless hatred and bigotry of man's inhumanity to man the warm presence of Thy love which can only be obscured but never destroyed by man's thoughtless prejudice against certain of his fellowmen. But especially we pray for the sunlight of Thy spirit to disperse the mists and shadows in our own hearts, so that we may sense Thy presence within. Help us to listen to Thy voice in the stillness, by quieting the dissonant clamor of selfish desires and unworthy thoughts. Help us to reflect Thy spirit in our own lives and thereby serve Thy kingdom. As the unnatural life ruled by violence which war brings creates among us ever growing fires of hatred and prejudice which threaten to destroy at home what our soldiers are struggling to preserve, help us to live ever according to Thy spirit of love and understanding and so serve Thee. May our inward lives be as firmly set rock against which the storms without expend their fury without moving them.

We pray O God that as we feel Thy spirit within us we will not lay off on Thee the cares which we should ourselves see through with Thy help. But with the inspiration of Thy spirit bravely take on ourselves our share of the struggle of good against evil. And as we triumph over evil in

our own hearts may we help toward that final victory of good in the world when Thy kingdom may reign on earth as in heaven. Help us to be stalwart in prayer, undergirding with our prayers all those who are laboring in the cause of peace for our sakes. May we never be guilty of sinning against them by ceasing to pray for them. May that same mind be in us, O God, which was also in Christ Jesus in whose name we pray.