

*Understanding The Fear Of God*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Joshua 24:14-18, Psalm 19:7-14, Luke 12:1-12*

Our Gospel reading today comes from Luke 12:1-12. Listen now to God's Word. "Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.""

Fear sells. We're not even to October and there are at least four horror movies in the theatres. Detroit media, when it's not being depressing, looks for stories that will move newspapers and gain viewers...and those stories are usually based around fear. A lot of our lives revolve around fear. What's the first thing a lot of us think of in the morning? "How do I look?" We're not sitting around looking at ourselves in a mirror all day. We're concerned what others might think out of the fear of rejection or ridicule. We buy homes and furniture and all sorts of things out of the fear that we won't keep up with others in our social circles, and we fear looking bad. I love being up here talking to you every week...but when ideas aren't coming and I'm trying to get a sermon done, the fear of failure is a big motivator! But in today's reading, Jesus talks about fear in a different way. If we understand the proper fear of God and take it to heart, we can live our lives free from many of the earthly fears that consume us.

The passage doesn't spell out for us why Jesus suddenly takes on this topic, but from the context we can figure it out. Last week, Jesus got the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees angry enough to start plotting against Him. Jesus and His disciples are starting to deal with real hostility. At the same time, the crowds are overwhelming. If anything, His dispute with the Pharisees increased their curiosity. Jesus' disciples are fighting two urges in the midst of all this. The first urge is pride. Thousands of people are coming to see Jesus, and they're at the heart of it all. They are His friends, His confidants. There's a temptation to make more of themselves than they really are. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the temptation to run. The opposition to Jesus' message is becoming fierce, and their lives might be in danger if Jesus continues to make enemies of the wrong people.

So Jesus gives them guidance. He warns them against their first temptation – hypocrisy – which He sees in the Pharisees. Last week, we saw how the Pharisees acted holy but were still filled with sin inside. Jesus warns that hypocrisy is like leaven - it only takes a little bit to work through a whole loaf of bread. Jesus knows that hypocrisy could destroy His disciples and tarnish their message. Jesus makes it clear – nothing is hidden from God. Any sin or virtue practiced in the darkness will eventually be brought to light. Hypocrisy may have its short-term pleasures, but in the end that corruption is going to be exposed.

While Jesus warns briefly about hypocrisy, His main teaching is perseverance in times of trial. Jesus knows the disciples will face hardship, persecution, even death at the hands of His opponents. But He tells the disciples not to fear them! He knows that the scribes and Pharisees mean business – He has already prophesied the death that lays in wait for Him. But death is not the end, according to Jesus. There's more. He tells the disciples that if they fear God, the one who has both mercy and judgment in His hands, there's no need to fear men. Now at first glance, this passage can sound very wrathful, like God is just waiting to throw people into Hell. But notice how this section starts. Jesus calls the disciples “friends.” In Luke's gospel, this is the only place that He does this. Jesus is not warning the crowd that they better turn or God's going to get them! Jesus is telling His friends that if they have the proper fear of God, then they'll know that even death is in God's hands, and that no one on earth can do anything to them that has eternal ramifications. They can kill the body but not the soul.

That's not exactly comforting, though, right? But Jesus assures His disciples. God loves them so much. If God knows every single sparrow on the earth, even though they're worthless by human standards, how much more does He love us! God knows the number of hairs on our heads. When I started thinking about it, I realized something...that's incredibly insignificant! Not only can nobody here count the hairs on their head, nobody wants to! God knows even the most inconsequential details about our lives, the things that we don't even bother to know. If He cares enough to know the trivial stuff, then how much more does He care about our eternity!

Since He's on the topic of eternity, Jesus starts laying out the terms of salvation. Jesus says that confessing Him before others is the key to being acknowledged by Him at the final judgment. Denying Him has the opposite effect. Now Jesus places emphasis on the fact that people can make mistakes and their judgment can change, and they can be forgiven their error for denying Him. We see that in Jesus' own disciples. The apostle Peter denies knowing Jesus three times, yet Jesus restores him after His resurrection. The apostle Paul first denied Christ and was responsible for the deaths of many Christians before Jesus appeared to Him on the road to Damascus. Paul's life was radically changed. But someone who denies Christ throughout life will be denied His salvation in death.

Jesus mentions briefly that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. No one thoroughly understands this saying. It may mean cursing the Spirit, but it more likely means denying the Holy Spirit or, as some of Jesus' opponents did, calling the Holy Spirit's work the work of Satan. It's never clear. All we really need to know is that the honest Christian doesn't need to fear it. The true believer loves the Holy Spirit and invites the Holy Spirit to work in his or her life. And each true believer has the Holy Spirit, who teaches us how to testify to God's goodness even in times of trial – *especially* in times of trial. We can rely on Him.

So what does this passage tell us for today? There are three things we can learn so we can live out the core of Jesus' words. The first one is this: *we need to understand the root of fear*. Second, *we must fear God*. And third, *fear nothing that would stand between us and God*.

Let's start at the beginning...we need to understand the root of fear. You know something? I'm not actually afraid of the things I'm afraid of! I'm not afraid of heights...really, I'm not. I can't walk up ten flights of steps and look down, but I'm not truly afraid of heights. You know what? I'm not afraid of falling either! I've watched enough parachute jumps to know that falling can be pretty cool. So what am I afraid of? I'm afraid of hitting the ground. And again, truth be told, I'm not afraid of the ground itself. I walk on ground every day of my life. What I am afraid of is pain...the pain of hitting the ground. Nothing else about the whole scenario actually bothers me. If I put together my other fears...fear of spiders, fear of snakes, fear of bees...they all relate back to the same thing. I'm not afraid of how they look or how they smell or anything else about them. I'm afraid of the pain of meeting a mad one in a dark alley!

Let's think about it...the root of all fear is pain...emotional, physical, spiritual, psychological pain. Our fears are not of the thing itself but the possible pain. Let's take an example of something outside the realm of physical pain. How many of us suffered through public speaking class at some point in high school? The truth is, I can't find a single person who's afraid of public speaking. I mean, I have friends who are terrified to get up in front of people and talk...their mouths get dry, they get all nervous...but it's not really the public speaking that's the problem. At its root, their fear is that people are going to hate it, that somebody's going to laugh at them. If every time we got up to speak everybody paid close attention and we got thunderous applause and nothing but positive comments and people baked cookies just to thank us, nobody'd have the fear of public speaking! Now that isn't to say that some fears aren't irrational – sometimes, we fear things that have absolutely no way of harming us, and that's part of being human. Sometimes we just have to plow through those.

Every rational fear we have is linked to pain...even the fear of death. Most of us don't fear death so much as we do the pain surrounding it, whether through disease or old age or whatever. The one thing we do fear surrounding death besides pain is the unknown. But then again, even the fear of the unknown stems from the fear of pain. If every time we experienced something unknown it was like the best Christmas celebration you ever had, you wouldn't fear the unknown at all. The unknown scares us because we are afraid that something harmful is lurking on the other side of it. It's difficult to find a fear that doesn't link back to pain.

All that said, fear can be good! Fear can make us better drivers, better spouses, better employers and better employees. Fear can be motivating. A good scary movie can be an adrenaline rush, and sometimes experiencing something scary that's actually harmless can help us master our fears. When we go through something frightful that doesn't actually lead to true pain, we can realize that our fear isn't necessary. And sometimes when we experience pain meant for our good through a person in authority over us, the fear we learn from that experience teaches us respect. We respect lots of people – from policemen to school principals – not only because they have negative authority, but also because they do a lot of good things for us. The truth is, good, rational fear saves us from a lot of pain.

And that leads to our second point – *we must fear God*. I'm going out on a limb here to share my own experience with being dumbstruck. There's a Canadian musician named Bruce Cockburn who is my favorite guitarist bar none. I've got every album he's ever recorded. He doesn't tour in the U.S. often, so the first time I ever went to see him in concert, I was sweating the whole time with excitement. Too much information? Yeah, probably. The first time I got to meet him in person, I sounded like an idiot. It was because I was in awe of this guy. OK, reality check...he's a great musician, sure, but for the most part, he's an ordinary guy who's just very good at what he does! And yet in his presence I was left speechless.

Now I'm sure none of you have had that kind of experience around somebody you really admired. But let's think for a minute about just what God has done. God created everything...every star in the sky, every planet, every part of the universe. We can't even tell what all's out there yet that He made! But closer to home...every thing you touch, every sound you hear, every sight you see, in some way, God was involved. Every song ever written is based on the tones of music God created us to enjoy. Every poem is written in language God formed our brains to comprehend...every painting is designed from colors and patterns and images He shaped. Even the mechanical things...the chair you sit on right now is made of metals and fabrics that God gave us the tools to forge and sew. Even the bad things, the terrible things, the bombs, the gossip magazines, the profane films and songs, they still in their core elements are made of things that God created and intended for good use.

That's just the start of it. We haven't scratched the surface of God's immense love or justice or mercy or wrath. We haven't contemplated His unfathomable goodness or kindness or grace, or the intensity with which God despises sin. We can't even come close to understanding His omnipotence or His holiness or His wisdom. He is beyond us in every way. In comparison to Him, we are nothing. Psalm 8 says, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" The truth is, awe isn't enough. Respect isn't enough. Fear is the only word that can encapsulate what our response to God should be. It's complete respect for all the goodness that He is and genuine fear because our sin, our wickedness, shows that we have rebelled against Him. We should fear God because He has every right to condemn us to an eternal, painful existence because we are all traitors to His cause.

And yet, through Jesus Christ, He doesn't see us as traitors. When we acknowledge Christ as our savior and lord, when God the Father sees us, He sees Jesus' righteousness in our place. Jesus Himself acknowledges us before the throne of heaven in front of all of God's angels and calls us His friend. That is enough to give me goosebumps. To think that I deserve eternal death and hell, but that God sent His own Son to die for my sins so that I might have eternal life with Him...that makes Him worthy of all of my honor and all my respect and all my fear. Everything is in His hands...my life, my death, my eternity. And not only that, but He loves us enough to care about the tiniest details about us that we ourselves don't even know! We owe Him our fear not only because He has the right to condemn us, but because when we accept the gift of the sacrifice He Himself made on our behalf, He saves us from eternal pain and instead gives us eternal joy in His presence.

That leads us to our final point: *fear nothing that would stand between us and God*. When it comes to eternal judgment, I don't have to account to any earthly authority about how I live my life or how I pastor this church. I have to account to God. Whether I have 50 people in my care or 5,000 doesn't matter to God. What matters to Him is whether or not I handled what I was given by Him with faithfulness. My pride could get the better of me and I could preach in a way to get tons of people in the doors, and I could compromise God's message to be liked. But I'll be judged on that too. I'll be judged on whether or not I acknowledged Jesus Christ in my work and in my life. That means that while I need to fear God, I don't need to fear what people think of me. And that's truly freeing.

And the same is true for you. God isn't concerned about whether you like going to a small church or a large church. God is concerned whether or not you stay faithful to your confession of Christ. We are called to be witnesses to Christ's work in our lives. If we do that faithfully, this particular church might grow...it might not. But we are accountable to acknowledging Jesus Christ to those around us. God knows that it's hard. The reason the Holy Spirit was sent to us was so that we might be able to proclaim Jesus Christ boldly. I know from talking with many of you you're not confident you know enough to tell your friends and neighbors about your faith. Jesus said the Holy Spirit will teach us what to speak as we need it. There is nothing to fear. Even the possibility of rejection and opposition in the short term is nothing in comparison to the long-term benefits. Think about how often in life we go through short-term pain for long-term gain. An athlete does it to get stronger at their sport. A dieter does it to lose weight. A cancer patient does it to gain years with family and friends. There are countless ways in which we sacrifice now to gain later. That's what Christ is calling us to do. What is there to fear? This pain is temporary, but the rewards are eternal. As the apostle Paul put it in Romans 8:38-39, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This week, understand your fear. Fear God – give Him your honor, your respect, yourself – and realize that when you do so, there is nothing on earth that can get between you and God. There is nothing to hide, for all will be revealed in the end. There is nothing to fear, for as Paul wrote, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" And there is nothing to lose and everything to gain by choosing to proclaim Jesus as your Lord and Savior today.