

Getting it Right: Session Six

Thou Shalt Not Live in Fear

Joshua 1:9; Hebrews 13:5-6; Isaiah 41:10

We all want to be the best people we can possibly be for God and we want to live holy and righteous lives. We also realize and admit there are times we are our own worst enemies in our quest to live right and make a difference in the world. There are myriad reasons for this. We all have strongest weaknesses. Toxic virtues like pride do damage to our spiritual progress. Today we will focus on the right-living killer known as fear, specifically living in a state of fear.

First off let's admit that fear happens to everyone. No one lives fear free. Developmental psychologists tell us we are born with the two distinct fears of falling and loud noises, although I would've guessed bright light and a lot of people wearing gowns and masks making loud noises. Experts inform us we pick up additional fears as we grow up, some built-in (nature) and others learned (nurture). How many distinct fears does the average person have? Hard to say with accuracy as this varies by personality type and other factors, but a study of 500 adults who were asked, "What do you fear?" came back with 7,000 responses.

Each of the responses could technically be seen as phobias rather than garden variety fear. Phobia derives from the Greek word (phobos) meaning fear or horror and is defined as an irrational fear of something that's unlikely to cause harm. Personally, I'm sticking with fear over phobia as I'm afraid of spiders, snakes and sharks and any/all of them can do definite harm. I'm not going to roll the dice on "unlikely" to do harm, even though that is "likely" true.

What are our most common fears or phobias? According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders there are five general categories of fear: Animals (including sharks); Natural environment (heights, thunder, darkness, earthquakes, etc.); Injury (physical or mental injuries plus situations like flying, driving and elevators); Other (catch-all including choking, drowning and loud noises).

The British Journal of Psychiatry lists these top fears:

1. Heights
2. Flying
3. Spiders
4. Thunder/Lightning
5. Being alone
6. Claustrophobia (confined/crowded spaces)
7. Blood
8. Water
9. Snakes
10. Animals.

Well, I'm batting .500 on the British list. What about America's All-American List of Fearful Phobias?

1. Spiders (even though there are 35,000 different species and only 12 pose risks)
2. Snakes
3. Heights (6% of the population)
4. Flying (1 in 3 adults)
5. Dogs
6. Water
7. Injections (30% of adults)
8. Public speaking
9. Being alone/loneliness
10. Death

A study of life-fears among adults ages 18-35 produced these unique results:

1. 77% fear they aren't presently (or in the future won't be) cared for or have people who believe in them.
2. 23% are lonely and fear continuing isolation.

3. 40% fear making major life decisions.
4. 40% have a fear of failure.
5. 40% fear what the future will bring.

A central question for us is this: Do followers of Jesus deal with the same fears as the secular, non-faith population? It's important to note that the previous study produced actual fears rather than definable, diagnosable phobias. This study went well beyond fearing spiders and snakes and crowded elevators. Sadly, Christian adults share many fears with non-faith adults, especially those that seem to be in direct conflict with the teachings of scripture. Several reputable studies show Christians having high levels of angst about the future, dying, death and the afterlife. Other areas of concern include fears related to loneliness, fears of evil and Satan, and a nagging fear that past misdeeds might be revealed and bring shame.

A second question is this: Should Christians have an abundance of fears, especially those related to the areas of evil, death, dying, lack of connection, loneliness, the future and the afterlife? In a word, no. The term "Fear not" is used approximately 500 times in scripture and Jesus used it frequently. To be human is to fear, to be a follower of Jesus is to fear less, and over time to become fearless. This is the goal for all of us. It's a process. It's a long process. It's a long but necessary process, one that Thomas Merton sees as being entirely holistic:

Every person has a basic fear around which they orient their lives – fears of worthlessness, being unprotected, useless, corrupted, overwhelmed, deprived, violated, uncomfortable and or defective. What we fear is an indication of what we seek. If we fear being deemed worthless, we desire to be seen as valuable and worthy.

The key is to move toward the positive and away from our fear. This is a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. Scripture speaks to this need and possibility in many places.

Have I not commanded you? Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you. Joshua 1:9

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I forsake you." So say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"
Hebrews 13:5-6

So do not fear, for I am with you; Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous hand. Isaiah 41:10

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There are two Old Testament stories featuring prophets who vacillated between fear and fearlessness, right living and giving into their fear. In many ways their stories are our story.

During Gideon's time, Israel was literally in hiding in their own land from the Midianites. God had given Israel over to Midian due to their continuing unfaithfulness. The Midianites would come into Israel, set up tents, steal crops and livestock or worse, kill the livestock and burn the crops. When Israel finally repented and asked for God's help, Gideon was called to deliver Israel and defeat Midian. Gideon was famous for needing signs from God (the fleece) but eventually rose to the task. He put an army together of 32,000 men but God had him send a portion away so Israel would not boast of their own success in battle. Gideon was told to send home every man who "trembled with fear" before the battle. Twenty-two thousand scared men went home. God could not use men of fear to accomplish His task.

The prophet Elijah was sent to confront Israel's evil King Ahab and his non-Hebrew wife Jezebel's idolatry. Ahab adopted his foreign pagan wife's god (Baal) and led Israel away from God, which prompted God to call Elijah to confront Israel's corrupt king. God's prophets and teachers were being killed by Jezebel's enforcers for speaking out against Ahab and Baal so most were in hiding, including Elijah. Focus on that last statement: Elijah, the prophet who battled 450 prophets of Baal in proving which God was real, and who was given supernatural strength and speed to catch up with a speeding chariot, was so afraid of Jezebel he was in hiding. So much for "I have not given you a spirit of fear..."

After hearing of Elijah's victory over the Baal prophets (who he had summarily executed) Jezebel put a hit out on him. What was his response? Was he filled with supernatural courage? Did he boldly confront the evil Queen of Israel? Did he stand up to Ahab for the true believers of Judaism? No, no and no. He ran away and hid once again.

Takeaways:

To be alive is to deal with fears and phobias. It comes with the job. The key is to never give in to our fears to the point we live in fear. Boldness and faith go hand in hand. Being fearful and living in a mode of discouragement will paralyze us spiritually, rendering us all but useless to the Kingdom... which isn't *right living*. Plus, ongoing fear wears us down. Famed humanist Bertrand Russell wrote: "All forms of fear produce fatigue." Simply put, we won't be productive if we are constantly fatigued.

God has a better plan in mind. "Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I'd like to see you living in better conditions" (Hafez). Apparently, God did not intend for us to live in fear. Spiders, snakes and tight spots are one thing; being afraid to step out of our comfort zones to serve and impact a needy world is quite another. Jesus said "Fear not" a lot. Sorry for the tiny rhyme, but it's true. Fear is not how God intends for us to live.

Fear and boldness contradict. Paulo Coelho writes: "A boat is safe in the harbor. But this is not the purpose of a boat." Eager to go to worship and very eager to go to Bible study? That's great. That's impressive. But what is being produced? None of us can change the world by playing it safe. Fear keeps us in the harbor. God is calling us out into the sea. It's our choice.

Of all people, who are we to be afraid of the future? Sorry. Apologies upfront. I may get a little preachy at this point. Our sins are forgiven past, present and future. Our sin condition has been dealt with by Jesus. That debt has been satisfied. That check has been cashed. On top of that God gave us the Holy Spirit, which means God gave us God/Himself to live within us, so we have instant wisdom and direction. Scared, worried, fearful? Ask God. Confer. Unload. Admit. And an amazing peace will come. Tomorrow will bring whatever tomorrow brings.

We will die. Everyone does, but why fear it if we believe we will be with God after we leave this life. Afraid of evil? Evil is scary but what can it do to us? In the end God wins.

Fear leaves no room for boldness

Boldness is at the heart of Right-Living

Amen and Amen

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