

The Fear of God: How to Maintain & Increase

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We come today to the 9th and last in a series of studies on one of the most basic themes of Holy Scripture, and yet sad to say, one of the most neglected themes of Scripture in our day, namely, the fear of God. One mature and very able student of the Word of God has been bold enough to make the statement, "The fear of God is the very soul of Godliness." In other words, there is no life of Godliness unless it is continually animated by the soul of the fear of God. We've spent some weeks examining many portions of Scripture which set forth the importance and centrality of the fear of God. We've tried to grasp something of the essence of the fear of God: what it is. We've looked at the essential ingredients of the fear of God and the source of the fear of God. And the last two Lord's Days we considered the practical effects of the fear of God. We made the statements in both of those studies that Scripture warrants the conclusion that the fear of God is the soil out of which a Godly life grows, and the absence of the fear of God is the soil out of which an ungodly life grows. Now since maintaining a profound sense of the majesty and goodness of God with that commensurate response of regarding His smile life's greatest blessing and His frown life's greatest dread is so essential, I want us to consider this morning in this our last study how to maintain and increase the fear of God in our hearts.

A basic text to put into perspective that which we will be considering this morning is found in Proverbs 23:17-18. In this portion of Scripture, we have, first of all, this negative command: "Let not thine heart envy sinners." Don't allow your heart to begin to be jealous of the dainties of the ungodly. Don't allow your spirit to begin to be affected with any kind of a longing for what they call life's pleasures. But rather--and here's the positive command: "Be thou in the fear of the LORD all the day long." In other words, the opposite of a heart that goes out with envy towards sinners and their sinful course of life is a heart that maintains a proper sense of the fear of God. Then in verse 18, the reason is given for this: "For surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off." When we view the end of the wicked as compared with the end of the God-fearing man, there is no question as to who was the wise one. And it's the immediacy of sin's enticements as well as the immediacy of sin's delights that becomes the bait which sinners lay hold of. Whereas, the Godly man, fully conscious that there is pleasure in sin for a season even to the Godly. To the extent he feeds the remains of corrupt nature, there is pleasure for the moment of that indulgence. But the child of God is the one whose whole life is geared, not by the perspective of the "now generation," for every child of God is a member of the "then generation." For Paul says, "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."

Now it's especially this positive command in the text that I would direct your attention to this morning: "Be thou in the fear of the LORD all the day long." But the question that some of you have ask me is, "Now, Pastor, before you're done, you're going to bring us something, aren't you, on how to maintain the fear of God?" And I assured you that I would. And that's the issue to which we would address ourselves this morning. How do we maintain the fear of God in our hearts? That this is the will of God is beyond dispute in the light of this text. We have an explicit command. In the light of the fact that we're commanded to be holy and Godly, and the fear of God is the soil of Godliness or the soul of Godliness, why, then, it's clear for us that it's God's will for us to maintain and increase the fear of God in our hearts. Now in answer to that question, how do we do this, I want you to consider with me, first of all, a general principle which is the foundation of the answer. And then we shall look at some specific guidelines or rules for maintaining the fear of God.

First of all, a general principle which we must understand and walk in the light of it if we are to increase and maintain the fear of God in our hearts. Simply stated it is this: when it comes to the outworking of the Christian life, what God declares to be His own work in us is to be the concern of our conscious spiritual endeavors.

Let me illustrate. A familiar passage, Galatians 5:22-23 states that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control. Whenever you see a person who manifests genuine selfless Christian love, you must attribute the presence of that love in the individual to a deep, inward, powerful work of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit, the manifestation of His presence and work, is love. Wherever you see genuine joy and peace and these other Christian graces (and I think it goes without dispute if we have any acquaintance with Scripture), we know that these graces are only brought into the life and flow out of the life by the work of the Spirit. However, the same God who tells us that these things are the fruit of His working, tells us through the same apostle in Colossians 3:12, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering." Verse 14: "Above all these things put on [love]."

You say, "Now wait a minute, here you tell me it's the fruit of the Spirit, and it's God's work to produce it. Now you tell me to put it on, and putting on is a verb of action." You didn't lay in bed for your clothes to crawl on you this morning. You had to get up and go to them and get them on you. Putting on is activity. Now which is it? Is the presence of love and meekness in the life of a believer the work of God, or is it the work of the believer? Well, it's not either/or. It's both. The fruit of the Spirit is love. Put on love, and you find that with all of the other graces. The fruit of the Spirit is joy, and yet Philippians 4:4 says, "Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice." Both aspects of this principle are most beautifully stated in Philippians 2:12-13 where the Apostle says,

"Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. [That is, apply yourself consciously and diligently to the outworking of God's saving purposes in your life with particular reference to the development of these graces of a blameless life.] For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure."

Here you have the command for our working based upon the fact of God's working. And God's working does not negate our working, and our working does not cancel out His working. They are co-extensive in the life of the believer. Now it's essential to understand this principle if we are to maintain and increase the fear of God in our hearts. For as we saw a few studies ago, the putting of the fear of God in the heart of a man is distinctly declared to be a sovereign work of God as a distinct blessing of the new covenant. In Jeremiah 32:40, God says, "I will put My fear in their hearts that they may not depart from Me."

So someone says, "If it's God's work to put His fear in our hearts, then the question of how to increase the fear of God is obvious. You've just got to pray and trust the Lord to do it. No, the principle is this: what God declares to be His work in us is to be the concern of the conscious labor and endeavor of the children of God. So then, in our efforts Scripturally directed, let us not allow ourselves the accusation of legalism and moralism to scare us away from seeking to discover in Scripture the specific guidelines God has given us by which we may develop and increase the fear of God in our hearts.

Someone asked a Puritan one time why he lived such a precise life, a life in which he had constant regard to the principles of Scripture, a life in which he was not a stranger to vows and Biblically-oriented rules of living. He said, "Sir, you ask me why I live such a precise life. My answer is simple. I serve a precise God." Why should we be concerned with discovering specific rules and guidelines for maintaining the fear of God? Because the God who has made us and the God before whom we walk has given us these principles in order that we might know how better to increase His fear in our hearts. So I hope that takes away any sense that this is self-effort in the sense that we are negating the grace of God. No, God alone can put His fear in our hearts. He is working in us to will and to do of His good pleasure. But we must work out with fear and trembling the cultivation and development of that fear.

So then, that brings us to the second area of our consideration this morning. Having considered the general principle, what are the specific directives for maintaining the fear of God in our hearts?

Directive number one is this: be certain of an interest in the new covenant. Now by interest, I do not mean a passive inquisitiveness, such as someone saying, "I'm interested in so and so's house," or "I'm kind of interested in that girl." I'm using the term "interest" in its stricter meaning. It's meaning number two listed in *Webster's Dictionary*. It means to have a share or participation in something. If someone says, "I have part interest in that business," he doesn't mean that once and a while, he goes by and looks at the show window. He means he's invested money. If you have part interest in something, you've invested of your substance.

Now, the Scripture tells us that this matter of the fear of God in the heart is the result of God's working in the new covenant. I read to you from Jeremiah 32:40 where God says, "I will put My fear into their hearts." And as long as you are in a state divorced from the blessings of that covenant; as long as you are an unconverted person; as long as you are a man or woman, fellow or girl who has never come to God through Christ in repentance and faith, pleading no grounds of approach to God but the blood of the everlasting covenant shed for sinners, then Romans 3:18 will continue to be your experience until you die unless you repent. For in describing what man is by nature, Paul said, "There is no fear of God before their eyes." That's what you are by

nature. You're one who does not fear God. O, you may have a dread of God that drives you from Him. But you don't have that Biblical fear we've been describing week after week, that regard of God's character in the glory of His majesty and goodness which draws your heart out to Him in love and devotion and desire to please Him. O no, you'll have a dread of God; you'll try to put thoughts of God out of your mind. You'll live with reference to the nitty gritty of life as though God did not exist. O, you may come into a building called the church once a week and go through the form of worship, but you do not live in the fear of God. What God says in His Word about your life, it has no real practical effect upon you in your home, your thoughts, what you read or don't read, what you watch or don't watch on TV, what you say or don't say, what you listen to or don't listen to. No, there's no fear of God before your eyes. The fact of who God is and His claims over you is not the dominant governing principle of your life. And that's true of everyone one of us by nature.

Many of us can think back with shame of years in which we lived that way. Just like the heathen wrings off the head of his chicken and sprinkles a little blood on his altar, we wrung the head off an hour or two a week and sprinkled it at the foot of a altar at some church and gave a little time and a little money, but we lived totally void of the fear of God until He arrested us by His grace and put His fear within our hearts. And so the first directive I would submit to you if you would know the increase of the fear of God, be certain that you have an interest in the new covenant. Be certain that you have come to Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant. Hebrews 12:24 says you are come unto Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. It is only as we come to Him saying in the words of the hymn, "Nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to Thy cross I cling." As we cast ourselves upon Christ for forgiveness and mercy, He then will make good in us all the blessings of that covenant that He sealed with His own precious blood. And child of God, as you long for an increase of the fear of God, make your interest in the new covenant the solid ground upon which you stand when you plead for an increase of His fear.

When you say, "O God, increase Your fear in me," what should be the argument that you press before Him? It should be this: "Lord Jesus, You died as the mediator of the new covenant. And one of the blessings of that covenant is that You would put Your fear into my heart. Lord Jesus, on the basis of Your shed blood, I plead for an increase of Your fear. Give me as much of Your fear as Your blood of the covenant warrants." That's the thought of Romans 8:32: "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things." If He died to ratify that covenant, certainly in His life, He will give us freely all the benefits of that covenant. And so rule number one for the increase of the fear of God is: be certain of an interest in the new covenant.

Secondly, feed your minds upon the Scriptures in general. Turn to Psalm 19. This Psalm celebrates the greatness of the two great spheres of divine revelation. God has revealed Himself to His creatures. Verses 1-6 celebrate the revelation God has made in creation. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth His handywork." Verses 7-11 celebrate the revelation God has made in His Word. So you have the revelation in creation and in Scripture: general revelation, special revelation. Now notice what the Psalmist does as he's thanking God for special revelation beginning with verse 7. He says,

"The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart:

the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether."

In the midst of all these terms describing special revelation, notice the first part of verse 9: "The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever." The Psalmist is saying there is such an inseparable relationship between the special revelation God has made in Scripture and the existence of the fear of God that the fear of God can for all intents and purposes be used as a synonym for the Word of God. So where he's using all these terms, he slips in this other one to show us that he who would increase in the fear of God must feed his mind upon the Scriptures in general. The Word of the Lord is so productive of the fear of the Lord that it may be used as a synonym.

But when a present, vital, extensive relationship to the Scriptures begins to wane, you are shriveling up the roots of the fear of God. And you will grow no more in the fear of God than you grow in your understanding of and assimilation of the Word of God written. So then, there's the daily necessity of as much exposure to the Scripture as possible both in private and in the family circle as we read the Scriptures with our children and our wives. And so there's the necessity of faithful, systematic attendance upon the public preaching and teaching of the Word of God. For though there are many portions of Scripture which, as far as we can analyze it, have no direct reference to creating and sustaining the fear of God, the overall effect of every truth of Scripture is to feed the fear of God. In one way or another, the man who absorbs the most of Scripture (spiritually assimilates it into his life's stream) is the man who will know most of the fear of God.

So then, when you're tempted to cut corners on those disciplines by which you are exposing your mind to Scripture, remember, that's the softening up tactics of the devil to move you out of the fear of God. And that always precedes moving you out of the realm of Godliness as we saw in our study last week. And if you and I are to be moved out of the realm of Godliness, we must, first of all, abandon our fear. And often the first step of abandoning our fear is cutting corners on either the private or the public exposure to the Word of God. Then don't be surprised if, in the pinch when the pressure's on, and the issue of God's smile or frown is the all-important issue, that somehow those things seem very distant. For there's not a Christian who has lived out a year as a true child of God that won't confess there are times when God and heaven and the Holy Spirit and Christ and Godliness--all of these things can seem so remote and distant and just a bunch of verbiage. Isn't it true? And you just sit and ask yourself, "What in the world am I? What in the world do I believe? How can these things really be a part of me and seem so distant from me?"

Many times, if we check into the reason for that state of soul, it's because there has been this erosion of systematic, consistent exposure to the Word of God. It's not as though you came up to a certain day and said, "Alright, from this day forward, the Bible and me will have nothing more to do with each other." No, it wasn't that at all. It was just a little extra pressure that made you cut corners on your stated time with God, just a few extra responsibilities the next day, and a few added distractions the next day until after a week or two of that pattern, you no longer felt your absence from the Scriptures. And you were no longer painfully aware of the erosion. And then there was the breakdown in the Christian life and experience, and you say, "Where did it all happen?" It happened here. And so I know no shortcut to maintaining the

fear of God. And I set before you as the second guideline and principle that you and I must feed our minds upon Scripture in general.

Thirdly, we must feed our souls upon the forgiveness of God in particular. Do you remember our study of Psalm 130:4? The Psalmist asked the question in verse 3, "If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" The thought of a holy God who knows everything, calling me, the creature, to an account for every sin is enough to make one cry as they shall cry in the day of judgment, that the rocks and the mountains might fall upon him. You can only dread a God who marks your sins and will call you into judgment for them, and rightly so. You ought to dread such a God, for the Psalmist says, "If Thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" And if we can't stand the thought of standing before God, we won't like the thought of walking with God. But he says, "There is forgiveness with Thee, that thou mayest be feared." When I can discover a way of forgiveness in this great God so that all of His wisdom and justice and holiness and power raised to infinity--all of those glorious attributes are on my side to produce forgiveness, I cannot help but fear this God with deepest, tenderest fear and worship Him with trembling hope and penitential tears. And so, as the Psalmist's mind is filled with the wonder of forgiveness, his heart is filled with the reality of the fear of God. So I give to you as the third rule for maintaining the fear of God: you must feed your soul upon the forgiveness of God.

The measure to which the fact and the wonder of forgiving grace sinks into your soul will be the measure of your fear of God. Feed often upon the fact of forgiveness. God who is holy, God who is righteous, God who is called the high and lofty One actually forgives me the sinful creature. Steep your mind often in the way of forgiveness. Why was there the infleshment of the second Person of the Godhead? Why should deity be enclosed in a virgin's womb? Why should He be born in a cow barn? Why should He die that death upon the cross? Ah, that the sons of men might have forgiveness consistent with God's holiness, His justice, His righteousness, His inflexible law. And as we feed, not only upon the fact of forgiveness, but the way of forgiveness, so our fear of God will be deepened and increased. As Manton has so beautifully said, "The heart is shy of a condemning God, but it adheres to a pardoning God. And nothing breeds this fear of God to offend Him as a tender sense of God's goodness in Jesus Christ."

You remember Psalm 34:8, a well-known text, often used as a Gospel invitation. The Psalmist says, "O taste and see that the Lord is good. And in verse 9, he says, "O fear the LORD, ye His saints: for there is no want to them that fear Him." You cannot fear Him as He ought to be feared except it be in the context of His gracious goodness and His condescending mercy in Jesus Christ. And so I would entreat you if you would have the fear of God sustained in your heart, feed your soul upon God's forgiveness.

Don't allow yourself to come back under the terrors of the law. That will drive you from Him. But allow yourself to bask in the mystery of His forgiveness and stand amazed at such a display of grace that would not only lay hold of you when you were wallowing in your filth, but bear so patiently with you in all of your wanderings and your stumbling. Stand amazed before such a display of forgiveness.

Rule number four: we must learn to feed our souls not only upon the forgiveness of God, but upon the majestic greatness of God, that is, those aspects of His character

which are lofty, particularly His holiness, His power, and His omnipotence. Notice this perspective in Hebrews 12, where the subject of reverence and Godly fear is before us. We have this exhortation in verse 28: "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." Receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken; confident that we are accepted in the beloved; confident, as was said earlier, that we've come to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant (our sins have been covered in His blood); confident of His goodness, let us have grace to serve Him acceptably with fear. Why? Verse 29: "For our God is a consuming fire." So you have the thought of the fear of God bounded on the one hand, by the contemplation of all the good things His grace brings, and on the other hand, by the contemplation of the majesty and greatness of this God, particularly as a God of consuming fire: infinite holiness actively opposed to all that is evil. And the fear of God is maintained by the contemplation, then, of His goodness in forgiveness on the one hand, and His majestic greatness on the other.

See the same perspective in Revelation 15. In this particular vision, John sees this sea of glass, and he sees this multitude of those who have come off triumphant from the conflict with the beast. Verse 3 declares, "And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvellous are Thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are Thy ways, Thou King of saints. Who shall not fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? for Thou only art holy...." Do you see the attributes of God which are in focus? Great, marvelous, holy, mighty, righteous King. And I know of no better way to describe these than to call them those aspects of God which set before us the majesty of His greatness. And they say, "As we contemplate this, it's unthinkable that any rational creature would not fear such a God. If they but know You as you are revealed, they cannot help but fear You."

So the principle for us as God's people is this: would you grow in the fear of God? Then you must feed your soul upon the majestic greatness of God. Specifically, by way of more detailed instruction, let me suggest that you be familiar with those portions of Scripture most calculated to set these concepts before you. The Christian who doesn't periodically read through Isaiah 40 on his knees with breathless wonder, I doubt will maintain much of the fear of God. That passage in which the prophet gives that lofty description of the majestic greatness of God, where he pulls together such imagery as is seldom to be found in any literature, where he speaks of the entire expanse of the heavens being but the span of God's hand, saying all the nations are like the drop on the side of a bucket (a little bit of condensation). He speaks of all the multitudes of the nations being like a little swarming mass of grasshoppers. He thinks of God as a great Shepard and all the galaxies and all the stars as being sheep. And He calls them by their names and leads forth the heavenly host--beautiful imagery! What's all this there for? To impress upon us the greatness of our God, for the chapter begins with the command to the messengers of Judah to get up unto a high mountain and say to the cities of Judah, "Behold, your God. Look upon Him; fix our gaze upon Him as He's revealed." And so be familiar with such portions of Scripture as Isaiah 40 and Revelation 1.

The second specific directive under this specific heading: attach yourself to a ministry which will assist you to maintain lofty views of God. Negatively stated, flee from a ministry that encourages you to snuggle up and make cheap love to the Deity. It's an abomination to God so much that goes on in His name. Attach yourself to a ministry which assists you to think of Him in His majestic greatness. The hymn writer captured

it, didn't he? "Majestic sweetness sits enthroned upon the Savior's brow." All sweetness: unprincipled sentiment. All majesty: too awesome to draw near. But when you have majesty and sweetness, you have the God of the Bible. So attach yourself to a ministry which assists you to feed your soul upon His majestic greatness.

Read the literature which will assist you to think often upon His greatness. Most of the books turned out in our day are how-to books. Everything has to do with what we're doing, doing, doing; how to, how to, how to. You can scour the bookshelves in vain to find a book that will set before you who He is. So you've got to go back a few years for the most part. Some of us are not just antiquarians when we read old books. It's because we find there men whose souls were permeated with these concepts of the majestic greatness of God. And when we enter into those pages, we somehow sense we're breathing the rarified air of the Biblical thought of who God is.

Acquaint yourself with the hymnody which does this. We sing hymns on our way to church every Sunday, and the hymn we started learning two Sundays ago is one in our own hymnbook which is tremendous along these lines:

My God, how wonderful Thou art; Thy majesty how bright.
How beautiful Thy mercy seat in depths of burning light,
How dread are Thine eternal years [in other words, contemplating that God is a God of eternity. The hymn writer says this becomes a dreadful thing. It's something that baffles us] O, everlasting Lord;
Thy holy angels, day and night, incessantly adore.
O, how I fear Thee, living God, with deepest tenderest fears
And worship Thee with trembling hope and penitential tears,
Yet I may love Thee too, O Lord, almighty as Thou art,
For Thou hast stooped to ask of me the love of my poor heart.

You see, that's a hymn which captures the Biblical concept of the goodness and the majesty of God. And it's that which feeds His fear in our hearts.

Rule number five: seek to cultivate an awareness of His presence. "Be thou in the fear of God all the day long." Since the day is made up of hours spent in the home, the car, the school, the playground, the ball field, the office, it's in those places we must cultivate the awareness of His presence. And the best passage I know of that sets out how this is done is Psalm 16, where the Psalmist says in verse 8, "I have set the LORD always before me." Do you see what he is saying? He says, "In every situation, as it were, I plant God before me so that I realize that in that situation, I am in that situation in the presence of God."

By contrast, in Psalm 54:3, when the Psalmist is describing the wicked, he says, "They have not set God before them." When they go into the office, they don't go in saying,

"God is here, this great God of goodness and forgiveness, this God of holiness and majesty in whose presence I live. He is here to be obeyed, to be loved, to be honored, to be glorified right in this office with unreasonable bosses and flirtatious secretaries and nasty companions I have to work with. Or He's right here is this schoolroom with all these kids that don't give a hoot about my God and my standards as I seek to obey Him. He's here to be loved, to be honored, to be confessed, to be obeyed at any cost. I have set the Lord always before me."

The wicked don't do this. The Psalmist says, "They have not set God before them." They set their own lusts before them. They set their own ambitions before them. They set their own flexible standards before them. But they don't set God before them.

To walk in God's fear is to cultivate this awareness of His presence, for you cannot fear a distant and forgotten God, but a near and remembered God. Practically speaking, this means we ought often to meditate on Psalm 139. Do you want to cultivate the awareness of His presence? Make it a practice to read often that Psalm. "Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there." To cultivate the sense of that pervasiveness of God's presence, seek to remind yourself in every situation that God is there. You've got to learn to do this. You just can't pray, "Now, Lord, do it for me." The Psalmist says, "I have set the Lord always before me." Well, God was there. The Psalmist's setting Him there didn't put Him there. He was there, but it's the recognition that He's there that becomes the transforming thing in the life. May God help us, then, to cultivate this awareness of His presence.

Rule number six: seek to cultivate the consciousness of your obligations to Him. As we saw in our description of the fear of God, one indispensable element of it is that in each situation, the Christian realizes that his relationship to God is the most important relationship.

So you're there in school, kids, and you know to pass that test and get a passing grade you're going to have to cheat. But you say, "There's something more important than my relationship to my grades and to my mom and dad who look at my report card; that's my relationship to the God who told me, 'Thou shalt not steal,' and that means I shall not steal somebody else's answers." So if you're walking in the fear of God and before you've gone off to school, you've said, "Lord, help me today to walk in Your fear." That means when you're tempted to cheat, the recognition of your obligation to God is stronger than that recognition of your obligation to have a nice report card to show Mom and Dad. It means when my lusts and passions cry out and the remains of my corruption would dictate a course of action contrary to God, if necessary, I must stick my heel on the neck of my lusts in order that I may be able to look up unembarrassed into the face of my God.

Even if you've got to rupture deep ties, the Lord says, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." He said, "I came to so implant the blessings of the new covenant in the hearts of men that men will so fear Me that even if they must rupture the deepest earthly ties, they'll be willing to do it for My sake." He said, "That's what I came to do." And part of that outworking is the people of God cultivating that consciousness of their supreme obligations unto Him.

Rule number seven: associate yourselves intimately with those who walk in His fear.* We must have dealing with those who don't fear God in civil matters. Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 5:9-10: "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world." You must have contact with those who don't fear God in civil things. You must have

surface relationships with them to establish a bridgehead of witness. But Psalm 119:63 is the key text that I would set before you in this matter. The Psalmist says, "I am a companion of all them that fear Thee, and of them that keep Thy precepts." He said, "I have deliberately chosen as my intimate associates those who obviously fear God."

Now why did he do this? The Bible is full of sound psychology, and the Psalmist understood the psychology of personal relationships. There is a power of imitation, of absorption, of contagion, one individual to another so that, all things being equal, you will become like those with whom you most intimately associate. There's a built-in law. That's why Scripture says the companion of fools will become a fool. That's why God warns us about intimate associations with evil men, lest we become like them (Proverbs 22:24-25). It's part of the way God has made us. We are not encased in our own little individualism. God ordained that men should live in community, and part of the operation of that is this built-in power of imitation, absorption, and contagion. Now, it's in the light of this that David said, "I am a companion of all them that fear Thee, and of them that keep Thy precepts. [Lord, I would fear You. And I know one of the best ways to have Your fear increased in my heart is to become the intimate associate of others who obviously fear You.]" And so I give to you as rule number seven: associate yourselves intimately with those who walk in His fear.

There's a wonderful commentary on this principle in Malachi 3. The context of this passage is God's indictment towards the great majority in Israel who have turned away from Him, not giving Him His just due in terms of their offerings; bringing unfit sacrifices. It's a period of decadence when God is sounding forth the note of judgment. And yet in the midst of this, in verse 16, God says, "Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon His name." Here you have that remnant, that nucleus of true Israelites who are described as those who fear the Lord, who think upon His name. And because they're in a minority, they recognize the necessity of being sustained in their fear of God by seeking out others who fear Him and banding together in the midst of decadence. So with the judgments of God being pronounced and decadence on every side, those who feared God often got together and encouraged one another in their course of fearing God in the midst of decadence. So I submit to you that if you would grow in His fear, you and I must associate ourselves intimately with those who walk in His fear. There's no such thing as a freelance Christianity and a do-it-yourself holiness. And if you don't know and sense and feel how much you need your brethren, you're living in a fool's paradise. And you're probably guilty of a delusive pride. These people as they looked out and saw the decadence on every side and knew something of God's fear in their hearts said, "I'll go down under if I try to make it by myself. Let me find others who fear Him." And so they spoke often one to another.

What a cursed thing to be deluded into thinking, "I can make it on my own." My friend, God may humble you with some pretty serious falls to get you to see that the body of Christ is not a luxury for your spiritual development. The church is not a luxury; it's not an option if you would grow. It is God's necessary place of growth and development. The whole thought of 1 Corinthians 12 is that every man is given a manifestation of the Spirit to profit withal. The whole thought of Ephesians 4 is that growth comes in the corporate life of the people of God. So Paul says to Timothy, "Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart (2 Timothy 2:22)." "Timothy, don't think you'll

roll up your sleeves and make it on your own. Find some others who have rolled up their sleeves and are going in the same direction and link arms."

There are times when your legs will get weak, and your knees will get feeble; you'll thank God you were linked to some strong-legged creatures going in the same direction. This is not a nominal relationship, but a linked arm relationship where you've bound yourself to your brethren. You're in a covenantal life, not only in covenant with God, but with the other members of His body, pledged to care one for another, to pray one for another, forbear one another, honoring one another--all of these phrases from Scripture, and we could quote many more. What is the thought? If we would develop and grow in His fear, we must associate ourselves intimately with those who walk in His fear.

A lot of people are, as Christians, like a lot of people in the world today. Common law marriages are becoming the in-thing. They've always been the thing, but it's sort of been an out-thing. But now it's the in-thing, particularly with the student generation who think marriage as an institution will be passe. And one of the terrible things about common-law relationships is the philosophy that undergirds them. Whether they'll admit it or not, here's the philosophy most people have: "I want all the privileges of marriage but none of its binding responsibilities and obligations. I want to share a bed with you, but the moment something develops where I may have to share myself with you and it will cost me something, I want out. And I don't want any trouble getting out." There are a lot of Christians that way. They want all the privileges of the fellowship with the people of God: a stable ministry in the Word, an atmosphere where God is exalted. But they don't want to be so bound but that they can slip out the moment the going gets rough.

Are you a common law Christian? Or are you married, not only to Christ, but to His people? If you're married to the people of God, you've entered into a covenantal life with them, committing yourself to care one for another, to pray one for another, to exhort one another. Then the first problem that comes, you don't go your separate ways. That's one of the great blessings of the institution of marriage. It's formalized civically and publicly. Many of us will confess we've faced snags in the working out of a marriage relationship, that if we hadn't been bound by some deeper ties than just sort of an unwritten agreement that we shared the same bed together, we would have gotten out of it.

The principle I always go over with couples when I counsel before they marry, I say, Are you convinced this is for keeps? When you say, "I do," that's it. You've had it. You've burned the bridges behind you no matter what difficulties you face. One way you never look is back for the way out of it. You're in it. The only direction you look is up and forward: up to God for grace and forward to resolve your problems. So that's the way it is when we bind ourselves to the people of God: for better or for worse. And we're in this together. Would you grow in the fear of God? Then intimately, not loosely, associate yourselves with those who walk in the fear of God.

Our time is gone. My last rule is obvious; I don't need to enlarge upon it. Fervently pray for the increase of His fear. But I trust these principles will be helpful. I've tried to be intensely pastoral this morning so that we might not just see this great concept of the fear of God out there as a beautiful necessary thing, but that day by day and week by week, it might be said of us as it was said of the churches in Acts 9:31, that they walked in the fear of God and in the consolation of the Holy Spirit and were

multiplied. May God grant that we as a church shall grow and increase in His fear and in the consolations of the Spirit and see the multiplication of those that the Lord would add the church.

*Editor's note: Associating intimately with those who walk in God's fear is a general principle. There are exceptions. Some Christians have been forced into isolation because of circumstances beyond their control (e.g. imprisonment, health issues, etc.) and yet, by God's grace, have grown and developed the graces of the Spirit.

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