

## Lesson 4: The Fear of Rejection

How would you describe yourself? What defines you? What do you find your deepest sense of identity in? We define ourselves by our relationships, positions, income, possessions, and experiences. As we think about where we find our identity and meaning, we find the places we are most sensitive to the rejection and approval of other people.

In *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, **Ed Welch** says, “Closely related to the fear that people will expose us is perhaps the most common reason we are controlled by other people: they can reject, ridicule, or despise us (rejection-fear). They don’t invite us to the party. They ignore us. They don’t like us. They aren’t pleased with us. They withhold the acceptance, love, or significance we want from them. As a result, we feel worthless.”

Often, in my own heart, I will make a rapid calculation of what will make me look best, what will make me look most important and most respectable in a particular social setting. For a long time, I cringed when meeting someone new, knowing the inevitable question of “What do you do for work?” would arise. People often like to talk about their work in social settings, so after hearing a few minutes of how they’re changing the world at their job, I sheepishly answer back with, “I drive a forklift in a warehouse.” In some cases, the person has answered, “Oh...that’s good.” I felt sheepish for many years because I always felt that my job title defined my person. And I knew that my job stocking seatbelt factory lines was not competing in importance with the guy I’m talking to who travels the country doing his job. The root cause of my sheepishness was that I felt that I would be rejected or looked down upon because of my employment.

A more shameful example of this fear is rooted in spiritual pride. By giving these personal examples, I’m leaving myself in a vulnerable and slightly uncomfortable position, but I want to be as transparent as possible to encourage you in the universality of the fear we all have. Even in the context of the church, sometimes I think things like, “Will I get called upon to serve in this way?” And sometimes I’m not called and I think “what’s wrong with me, why wasn’t I considered?” Or I get asked, and immediately my thoughts begin running towards, “what will people think of the way I performed this task?” When I’m not asked the next time, I think, “Was I bad last time and they didn’t like me?”

Fear of rejection, and the desire for acceptance, is one of Satan’s most significant ways of undermining what it means to be a Christian, for it goes directly contrary to what Christ has said following Him would mean. The Puritan Richard Baxter in *Directions against Inordinate Man-pleasing*, speaking nearly 350 years ago, could be speaking to us today about the bankruptcy of living for the acceptance of other people when he says, “**Remember** what a life of unquietness and continual vexation you choose, if you place your peace or happiness in the good will or word of man. For having showed you how impossible a task you undertake, it must follow that the pursuit of it must be a life of torment. To engage yourselves in so great cares, when you are sure to be disappointed; to make that your end, which you cannot attain; to find that you labour in vain, and daily meet with displeasure instead of the favour you expected; must needs be a very grievous life. **You are** like one that dwelleth on the top of a mountain, and yet cannot endure the wind to blow upon him; or like him that dwelleth in a wood, and yet is afraid of the shaking of a leaf. You dwell among a world of ulcerated, selfish, contradictory, mutable, unpleasable minds, and yet you cannot endure their displeasure. Are you magistrates? The people will murmur at you, and those that are most incompetent and incapable will be the forwardest to censure you, and think that they could govern much better than you. **Those that** bear the necessary burdens of the common safety and defence, will say that you oppress them, and the malefactors that are punished, will say you deal unmercifully by them; and those that have a cause never so unjust, will say you wrong them, if it go not on their side. Are you pastors and teachers? You will seem too rough to one, and too smooth to another; yea, too rough to the same man when by reproof or censure you correct his faults, who censureth you as too smooth and a friend to sinners, when you are to deal in the cause of others. No sermon that you preach is like to be pleasing to all your hearers; nor any of your ministerial works. Are you lawyers? The clients that lost their cause, behind your backs will call you unconscionable, and say you betrayed them; and those that prevailed, will call you covetous, and tell how much money you took of them, and how little you did for it: so that it is no wonder that among the vulgar your profession is the matter of their reproach.”

So, all of this makes perfect sense to us as Christians, we should be able to easily turn from fearing the opinions of others, their rejection or lack of acceptance and walk in the fear of the Lord, right? Well, it's not quite so easy. Why is this?

People do reject us. Our experience tells us that there is something to fear or at least be careful about. People reject us because of things we do or say, because of things related to who we are. It's not always outright rejection; it's sometimes not accepting us as much as we desire. Think about how you have been rejected or have felt rejected or not approved in the last month, the last week, even today?

### **DISCUSSION QUESTION: What are some ways that you have been rejected in the past?**

Rejection hurts: it doesn't feel good to receive the disapproving comment from a friend or the sense of not quite satisfying your parents' expectations for you. The purpose of this lesson is not to encourage putting on a Christian stoicism. Rejection hurts emotionally/psychologically, but our purpose as Christians is not first and foremost about feeling right, but being right with God, believing right, and finally living right. This is a key difference in the way Christians face fear of rejection and the way the world deals with this fear. The world seeks to cope with and treat the symptoms. The Christian recognizes that the symptoms are real, but changing symptoms apart from the core problem is vain and ultimately damning.

#### **I. How do we manifest fear that other people will reject us?**

- a) Personality/traits - We fear rejection for who we are: personality, education, job title, socioeconomic position, gender, race, experiences, relationships. You change your personality because you think people will like you better. You seek after a certain degree or job title so that you can be accepted. You fear discrimination because of your race or gender. You fear being rejected by certain people because of other friends you have chosen. Fear of rejection is manifest by an overwhelming desire for approval. The greater the expectation and the desire for approval, the greater will be the fear and feeling of rejection as those expectations are increasingly not met. Whose approval are you currently seeking or can't imagine living without?
- b) Fishing for compliments - This is a subtle way we fear rejection from others: this is a way I often find myself struggling. I love receiving praise from others, and I am tempted to appear humble rather than be humble. How do we go fishing? Lou Priolo in *Pleasing People* gives several ways: by intentionally putting ourselves down with the hope that others will correct or disagree with us; by constantly asking for assessment or critique in the hope that it will result in praise; by bringing up subjects that will lead to your being praised or trying to keep those subjects from being changed; and by praising things about others that you see in yourself with the hopes that they will reciprocate. Yet Proverbs 25:27 tells us, **"It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glory to search out one's own glory."**
- c) Perfectionism - This is another manifestation of the fear of rejection. A need to be the very best at everything you do. I must be involved in everything and be the best person involved in each of those venues. Or you overextend yourself to give yourself an excuse for being less than excellent, you say to yourself or others, "I could have been better, but you know, we have to prioritize."
- d) Going along with the crowd - In the clothing we wear we demonstrate our fear of rejection. What will he or she think if I'm wearing that brand or not wearing this other brand? Or dressing in the latest fashions. Now guys, some of you could serve all of us with a little more fear of man in this area. But seriously, do you find identity in your clothing? What about modesty? Do you think you must dress in a certain way, even if it is a bit more revealing, in order to attract the attention and approval of another?

One of the most common experiences of fear of rejection we face is the temptation to go along with the crowd, peer pressure. And that crowd doesn't have to be large. Thinking back to the quote at the beginning, are there actions you take merely because another person has become the definition of cool or acceptable or appropriate? It is far more important that you learn today what it means to live in the fear of God and not peers, even if it means not being the most popular person today.

This fear is so often manifest in our desire to be a part of an "inner circle". This is an even more destructive sin when we carry it into the church. Do you find pride or identity or value in the fact that you have a role (or position) in this church, or think negatively of yourself because you don't? What about favoritism? Again, Scripture is clear about how destructive this is to a clear expression of the Gospel. James tells us not to show favoritism to the rich or powerful that come into our presence. This is what the world does because they crave acceptance and fear rejection. The Christian community is not like this. Membership in a local church helps us to overcome this fear of rejection as we come together with people that may or may not be like us in many earthly ways yet our identity in Christ is far surpassing.

- e) We fail to share the gospel - We demonstrate this fear of rejection when we fail to share the Gospel out of fear of how that person will respond. As **Ed Welch** so aptly said, *"Sometimes we would prefer to die for Jesus than to live for him ... however, if making a decision for Jesus means that we might spend years being unpopular, ignored, poor, or criticized, then there are masses of Christians who temporarily put their faith on the shelf. ... In other words kill me, but don't keep me from being liked, appreciated, or respected. Aren't the most popular mission trips the ones that take us far from our own neighborhood? Russia is easy, our own neighborhood is a constant challenge."*
- f) We don't confront sin – We don't confront it, or we confront it in different ways depending on the person we are confronting. This is especially tempting for those of us that are seeking to be involved in the lives of others. In your discipleship relationships, are you closed in your heart about your own struggles and problems, not because you think it's irrelevant, but because you desire their approval or you respect them in a different way?
- g) Our passivity towards others - We demonstrate this fear of rejection in our passivity towards others, waiting for them to initiate—love, reconciliation, leadership, decisions, and righteousness. This doesn't mean we ignore social cues and plow forward with our way, in the name of initiation, for that also fails to appropriately love and care for others. But are there ways in which you would refrain from doing what you know to be the right thing because you fear rejection?

On a broader level, much that goes into the programs and services of evangelical churches is based on fear of rejection and desire for approval. We think we need to give people what they want, give them what the research says they prefer, so that our churches will be full and budgets will be met and that then we will have the ministry desired. Implicit in this philosophy of ministry is a desire for acceptance from others. Or maybe you are a member of this church and you do certain things, say certain things, or spend time with certain people because you believe those are the things that are necessary to be a good member in the eyes of other people? I want to be careful here and say that the answer here is not to stop doing the right things, but to pray for a heart that desires obedience out of a heart of love rather than a heart that fears rejection and desires approval from man.

- h) Speech - Many types of speech that we engage in demonstrate a fear of rejection. Gossip, saying behind someone's back something you would never say to their face. Or its equally evil and more subtle twin, flattery, saying to someone's face something you would never say behind their back. Lying, blame-shifting, self-justifying language, manipulation, changing the subject of conversation or keeping it on a topic—these are all types of communication that flow out of a fear of rejection and desire for acceptance.

## DISCUSSION QUESTION: How do we see fear of rejection in our culture and in our own lives?

### II. How fearing rejection and desiring approval harms us

Besides the fact that giving into the fear of rejection is opposed to the fear of the Lord, what are some ways we see this fear of others and desire to please them endanger us?

1. It enslaves us to others. **Priolo** says, *"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."*
2. The love for praise actually undermines our receiving it. **Priolo** again, says, *"Those from whom you long to receive honor, and those whom you desire to impress, will eventually be offended (if not repulsed) by the pride that generates your lust."*
3. Heavenly rewards are lost. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)
4. It causes us to be increasingly blind to our own sins. Andrew Murray wrote, *"One great power of sin is that it blinds men so that they do not recognize its true character."*
5. It makes us more susceptible to being ensnared by flattery and deceit.
6. It causes us to be more susceptible to other sins, which is not surprising, when we demote God from the place of utmost fear and trust in our hearts. What are some of the sins that flow out of fear of rejection, we looked at some of those earlier: hypocrisy, discontentment, greed, timidity, unteachability, indecision, etc.
7. It can take a physical and psychological toll: stomach problems, stress and tension, headaches, fatigue, depression, mood shifts, etc.

### III. How pride fuels our fear of rejection

If the fear of man is the fire that rages within our hearts, then pride is the wood and oxygen that fuels that blaze. How does pride fuel the fear of man, how does it provide the foundation for fearing man?

Pride can do a variety of different things in relation to the fear of man:

1. Can cause us to distort our sins and faults, either maximizing or minimizing
2. Will tempt us to elicit praise from others
3. Can cause us to misapply the praise we receive ... "look at how great I am, they said this about me ..."
4. Will tempt us to overvalue our strengths and minimize our weaknesses or sins.
5. Will tempt us to change our behavior, not seek a changed heart.
6. Will tempt us to dismiss confrontation over sin or weakness ... "it must just be their opinion." Pride cannot handle criticism.

## DISCUSSION QUESTION: What are other ways you see pride fueling fear of man in your life?

#### IV. When is it appropriate to please other people?

We asked this question briefly in our first lesson, it would be appropriate now to return to this question. We have thought about all the ways we fear rejection and crave approval and acceptance. Well, aren't there times and circumstances in which it is not only okay, but correct to seek approval? YES. Let's look at some of those now. Scripture describes ways in which we should seek to please others and gain their approval.

1. It is appropriate to desire to please others, so long as that desire is not greater than our love for God, and our desire to obey Him. Proverbs 15:33, **"The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor."** Scripture doesn't say that receiving honor and esteem and approval is wrong; in fact often it is a blessing that accompanies a righteous life.
2. As much as needed for gospel ministry and proclamation. I Timothy 3:7, **"Moreover, he (the Overseer) must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil"**. As Christians, we should seek to have a good reputation with outsiders, but again this must be tempered with a realization that this is for God's glory and praise and not our own, and ultimately we are not finding our identity or value in this type of approval. Paul also says in I Corinthians 9:19-23, that he has become all things to all men. Paul recognizes that in matters that are not sin, it is appropriate to adapt oneself to one's audience in a way that will most appropriately adorn the Gospel.
3. In relation to pleasing and respecting parents and authorities, it is not only appropriate but also commanded. Again this is within the context of not pleasing these individuals above and beyond fearing and trusting God. So are you willing to disobey the Lord in order to please these people? Consider Exodus 20:12 and Titus 2:9-10. So in regard to your boss, there is nothing sinful about taking certain actions because you know that this will please them. In fact, if you know that your boss would be pleased by you doing something a certain way (and it's not sin), it would be sinful for you to choose to not do your task in that way.
4. If you are married, it is right for you to seek to please your spouse. If you are married, or if you become married, this relationship supercedes all others. You are now responsible to please your spouse, not your parents. This may involve the abandonment of old beliefs, activities, traditions. The desire for approval from one's parents should no longer be a concern, and this again doesn't mean a disregard for them. Regarding the nature of how one should rightly seek approval of one's spouse according to I Corinthians 7:32-34, **Priolo** says, *"The Greek word used in verse 33, which is translated 'to please,' is a word that has several nuances of meaning. Its root means 'to fit in with.' It can also mean 'to conform,' 'to adapt,' 'to satisfy,' 'to soften one's heart to,' 'to meet with one's approval' or 'to accommodate.' The word implies a pre-existing relationship between the one doing the pleasing and the one being pleased. While an unmarried Christian should have his mind focused almost exclusively on how he may please the Lord, the attention of a married Christian must be focused not only on pleasing the Lord, but also on pleasing their spouse. The Bible assumes that all married persons will have their interests divided between pleasing Christ, which is always top priority, and pleasing their spouses."*
5. It is right to deny yourself of your Christian liberties for the sake of not offending a weaker brother. Paul in Romans 15 describes what it means to actually serve and love another by not demanding that you exercise the fullness of your liberty in their presence. Again, each situation calls for discernment and an examination of your own motives. Are you denying your liberty for the sake of them not stumbling or are you changing your behavior around someone because of fear of rejection like Peter with the Judaizers in Galatians.

Again, in seeking to make the distinction between appropriate desire to please others and fear of rejection, it is critical to be in transparent relationships with other Christians: be honest about your thoughts and motives as best you can.

## V. Fear of rejection in Scripture

We have already looked at Scripture today, but now let's look at several who grappled with this struggle.

1. We see that the fear of man falls into the category of idolatry laid out by Paul in Romans 1:25.
2. Tendency to treat people with partiality - Men and women throughout Scripture, and we today, turn other people into idols. This happens when we begin to think that people can give us something we need that God isn't giving to us; when we believe that they can protect us in ways that God cannot, maybe from loneliness, discontent, or lack of control; when we add people to our worship portfolio. God is good up to a point, but we need to fear other people to "hedge our investments." Worshipping anyone or anything in addition to God is just as wicked as a complete substitute; we worship other people because of sin and shame. We long for a more domesticated god, and other people easily fit that bill.

Deuteronomy 1:17, **"Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God."** Moses recognized the tendency for those in authority to treat people with partiality.

3. The Jewish leaders fear being rejected by man, more than God.

John 12:42-43, **"Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God."** In one of the saddest statements in the Gospels, many of the Jewish leaders would have believed in Christ but for fear of man they didn't.

4. The Christian grows to fear the opinions and approval of others less and less, as they grow in the grace and knowledge of God.

I Corinthians 2:15, **"The spiritual man makes judgments about all things but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment."** Paul is telling us that the Christian is not subject to the wisdom of this world, wisdom that would proclaim the Gospel to be foolishness. The more we live in this reality, the less we are fearful of the opinions of others and their fleeting approval.

5. Peter at Antioch with the Jews

Galatians 2:11-12, **"When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group."** Here we see Peter again, this time giving into fear of rejection, desiring the approval of this group of Judaizers and in the process serving to confuse the Gospel among his Gentile friends.

6. Aaron facilitating and encouraging the people's idolatry with the golden calf.

In Exodus 32, Aaron facilitated and encouraged the people's idolatry out of fear of not maintaining their approval. All the people who engaged in this idolatry were judged by the Lord. When leaders give in to the fear of man and crave the approval of those they lead, it will lead to disastrous consequences to the leader and followers, for the Lord does not let anyone off the hook. In this account, we see Aaron fear man not only in the act of facilitating the formation of the golden calf, but also in the way he blame-shifted and self-justified when Moses asked for an explanation.

7. Pilate before the crowd

Mark 15:15, **"Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified."** In spite of acknowledging that Jesus had done no crime, Pilate preferred to

appease the masses and so became the custodian of the greatest mistrial in history. He desired popularity, peace, and approval more than he feared God.

Which leads us to our last point in thinking about how we are tempted by the fear of rejections and how we overcome this fear of man.

## VI. Jesus was (and is) rejected by man.

1. Jesus was rejected by man, so that we would not be rejected by God.

Isaiah 53:3 says, **“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”** This begins to put our fear of rejection in perspective. Jesus, the innocent one, experienced the most severe form of rejection. He was rejected by man and by God, so that we would not be rejected by God and that we would no longer be enslaved to fearing those created by God.

2. We understand that because of this rejection that Jesus endured for us, any rejection we are called to face in this life will be temporary; just as the approval we so desperately seek to attain is fleeting, so any rejection we do experience will fade and be forgotten quickly. And have you not seen this to be so in your life already. Can you remember ways you feared being rejected when you were 10? Do you still fear those same specific things? It is unlikely.
3. In **Ephesians 2**, Paul describes how that in Christ we are now accepted by God. Christian, you have received the greatest approval and acceptance you will ever need.
4. As we looked at last lesson, according to **Hebrews 4:14-16**, because Jesus was rejected He is able to sympathize with our rejections. Not only that, but because of his high priestly function, we can come to Him with our fears and ask with confidence that He would replace our insufficient fears of other people with a robust and complete fear of Him.

## DISCUSSION QUESTION: How does the Gospel intersect our fear of rejection?

What would it mean for you to begin living in the reality of following the One who has been despised and rejected by man for us.

At home:

At work:

At church:

Questions or Comments?