

Lesson 5: The Fear of Harm

Over the last 2 lessons, we have examined particular ways we wrongly fear others. We considered the fear of exposure two lessons ago, and the fear of rejection last lesson. In this lesson we will consider the fear of harm from other people. As we have already considered, our fear of others may be multi-faceted. Fear of harm may be woven into fear of exposure and/or fear of rejection. The solution to each of these fears is the same – fearing God.

I. Introduction: Jesus Commands Us Not to Fear Harm, So Why Do We?

Consider Matthew 10:28 at the top of your outline. It reads, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Jesus clearly tells us that we shouldn’t fear the harm that others can inflict on us. Yet, we still fear harm. Why is that? **We’re afraid of harm because people can *actually* harm us.** Since Cain killed his brother Abel in Genesis 3, men and women have had reason to fear that their fellow man can inflict great harm, to the point of death. But we don’t have to look at Scripture to understand what this struggle looks and feels like.

In many ways, this type of fear of man can feel like the most legitimate form, and I want to be careful to say that when I speak of fearing man especially in the context of physical harm, I am not **dismissing an appropriate concern for safety and security**. We serve a protecting God that desires to provide ultimate security to His children, so when we do things that encourage this aspect of God’s character, we are actually reflecting the fear of the Lord properly. This type of thoughtful concern for safety can be reflected in a number of ways:

- a. By not walking through certain neighborhoods alone at night
- b. Implementing a child protection program here at church
- c. How a husband and father is concerned to keep his wife and children safe

I’m certain there are countless examples that we could use to illustrate this appropriate concern for physical safety. And yet, Jesus commands us not to fear. So how do we reconcile Jesus’ command not to fear physical harm with our understanding that being and feeling safe is a good thing? Let’s look closely at what Jesus is saying here. He is recognizing that people can hurt us; they can go as far as killing us (which is the ultimate in physical harm). In fact, He experienced this Himself. But what He tells us is that **we need to have a radical reorientation towards fear of harm from man**. In one sense a fear of harm from others is appropriate because we want to be wise and avoid such harm. To protect ourselves and others.

So if that fear, that concern for physical safety, as I’m describing it *is* appropriate, what is Jesus saying? He’s saying that our fear of God should be far above our fear of man. If they could be measured on a scale, an appropriate fear of man would be a pebble before the mountain that is an appropriate fear of God. Fear of the one who is able to determine our eternal destiny, whether we live in everlasting judgment or everlasting life—this is the one who should be utmost in our fears, this is the one in whom we should place our trust, this is the one who should control our lives, this is the one we should serve.

Before we get into some ways we may fear harm from others, I realize that some in this room may feel this fear more acutely because you have experienced physical harm. You may have been the one who was the victim of another's sin. We will spend some time thinking through how the Gospel addresses our past experiences of physical harm. Those who have been victims of suffering of physical harm can only properly understand and address their experience through the lens of the Gospel.

Some of these categories may be fresh in your mind or experience. Our purpose for thinking through these categories is not to relive those experiences but to give us a proper framework as we think through these things in our lives and as we minister to others.

II. Fear of Physical Harm

1. Some of the most difficult and painful physical harm takes place in the family. Whether between spouses, parents and children, or other family relationships, physical harm in this context can cause some of the most difficult struggles post-abuse. Abuse within the context of relationships that should be characterized by the highest levels of trust, love, and vulnerability.
2. Sexual exploitation in whatever form, is another way in which we can fear others in this way, and again this may be influenced by your own experience. A subset of this category would be represented in the man who emotionally and physically takes advantage of a woman for manipulative purposes.
3. Bullying is another real example of how we fear physical harm from others. This was a massive part of my childhood. By grade 7, I remember literally crying to my Mom at the breakfast table, begging her to let me stay home, because I knew I was going to get in a schoolyard fight. I was constantly bullied as a child, being the victim of a different bullies' fist virtually every year from grade 3 to grade 9. Some of this may seem to be an innocuous part of childhood, but even in how we instruct our children in dealing with other physically violent children, we can teach them to fear the Lord more than people. Because neighborhood bullies grow up, we need to not dismiss these opportunities to teach our children how to deal with their fears.
4. Persecution/physical suffering for the Gospel is another common fear. Are you afraid to go to certain parts of the world because of fear of the physical harm that you may incur for doing so? Are you feeling led to maybe go on a short-term missions trip but fearing what physical harm you may face? It can be a very real threat.
5. What about terrorism? In a world where terror attacks are random and increasingly frequent, this can become a fear of man that becomes paralyzing for some.
6. How about racism? This fear of man may manifest itself both in fear of physical harm and/or fear of rejection. Are there certain people that you fear physical harm from simply because of the color of their skin or their ethnic background? This fear works in various ways: from the out workings we have seen in segregation, in beatings and shootings, to less stated actions, like choosing not to live in certain places. Do you feel "safer" or less safe around people that have a particular skin color? Do you carry that fear into your relationships with other brothers and

sisters in Christ? Do you allow that fear to keep you from trusting God? Do you allow that fear to keep you from loving your neighbor as Christ commanded?

Again, I want to say that different people struggle with this fear in different ways. As we continue to look at these fears through the lens of the Gospel, I do not intend to gloss over the particular way you struggle. But these categories may provide great conversation starters with another Christian friend in the church.

III. Fear of non-physical harm

It is simply not true that “sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never hurt me.” If we embrace this attitude, we are responding with a type of stoicism that is not a Gospel response but is instead self-protective and self-exalting.

1. A verbally abusive boss or spouse or parent will produce the same type of fear of man that the physical acts of harm will also produce. It is not simply a fear of being rejected by that person or not being accepted by them. It is also not simply a fear of exposure, although there can certainly be threads of this running through these encounters as well. These encounters can leave us feeling as though we are physically being weighed down, the emotional and psychological burden can be crushing.
2. Sexual harassment can also fall into this category, whether you are receiving unwanted sexual advances from someone or have in the past, and fear and mistrust others because of the fear of being harmed in this way.

With any of these issues, I am not in any way suggesting that Scripture says we should stay in abusive situations, and certainly if you are in a situation like this, it would be wise to speak to another brother/sister in Christ whom you trust.

As we consider proper responses to these situations, we may need to pray for the strength to show love and gentleness to the person. In other cases, we may need to speak very direct and truthful words. Those who fear being harmed are often tempted to either be silent or angry in response. The Gospel calls us to something else.

IV. How has fear of harm from others controlled you?

What are some of the ways that our lives are shaped by this type of fear of man? Well, if the fear is based in past experience of physical harm, there can be the very real fear that they will be hurt again. This fear can be paralyzing.

1. There can be a perpetual sense of being a victim, a temptation to place blame for all future difficulties on those past experiences. Being a victim can become your identity. For those who

may have been abused, there may also be a temptation to think that you deserved it. Let me take this opportunity to reject that lie. If you have ever thought, “I deserved the hurt that I received from others because I’m a bad person or God is angry with me,” please hear me. That’s a lie. It is true that we all deserve death because of our sin against God. “For the wages of sin is death.” But the punishment that God meets out is holy Justice. There is no evil in God’s wrath. When a man or woman unjustly hurts you. If you are abused, it’s wrong. You do not deserve injustice.

2. Related to this experience is Self-pity. Self-pity is another response to past experiences that seems to be causing fear today. Thoughts like, “It would be so much easier for me to trust the Lord if only I hadn’t experienced this. I can never change from fearing man in this way, it’s just the way I am. I’m really a worse sinner than others I guess.” Self-pity can be a very attractive response, and yet we must recognize that self-pity is simply another manifestation of pride. Just like the self-confident pride that seems obvious, self-pity at its heart is self-focused and seeks trust in self, instead of God.
3. Let’s consider some the ways our relationships with other people can be affected. First, a cloud of shameful feelings may plague the person who has experienced physical harm in the past. We understand that we experience shame because of sin, but this sense of shame that accompanies being sinned against can feel more complicated. The person who has been sinned against may feel shame and a need to do penance or a need to identify a way in which their sin merited them being sinned against. It is necessary to repent of sins committed, but it is a vain pursuit to seek to do penance for being sinned against.

The person struggling with this fear of man is also likely to struggle with trusting others. If there is a regular fear of physical harm or past experiences of harm, it may be a temptation to view others through that experiential grid. We need to consider how we can move away from this view of others and towards loving and serving others. The more we fear, the less we will love, the more tempted we will be to withdraw and avoid others.

4. Bitterness is a deeper sense of some of these other things. As we struggle with these other responses and fail to repent of them and pursue Christ-like responses, they will grow into a deeper root of bitterness towards other people and maybe even towards God Himself.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Is anyone willing to describe an effect of being hurt that I may not have mentioned? Perhaps something you or someone you know has experienced?

V. What we need to Know about the Harmful Person

1. Wrong fear of others tends to make all their actions about us. Yet, **the harmful person’s problem is not you**—what is it? Pride, fear, anger, insecurity, desire for control, evil?

- a. They are controlled by the fear of man too. This holds true for all types of fear of man. Have you stopped to consider that the thing driving that person you fear is also the fear of man?
 - b. They probably see their sin as small. This point really helps me in dealing with the harmful person [seeing how people treat others, not just you]
2. They need the Gospel, not our fear of them. Have you ever considered this? Your fear driven response to the harmful person may be obscuring their Gospel need. How might this look?
 - a. The abusive person may have never had anyone speak truthfully to them about the consequences of their actions or words. They may have learned that the only way to guard, protect what they want is to evoke fear in others.
 - b. It takes great humility, courage, and patience to truthfully confront and resist the harmful person. Living in fear or even contempt of them may feel easier, and ironically in some cases it may even feel safer than the uncertainty of speaking truthfully to them and calling them to an account.
3. We are all more similar to the harmful person, than we are to Christ.
 - a. This is not to minimize our standing in Christ as Christians, His sympathizing with our weaknesses and afflictions.
 - b. BUT your sin caused Christ's harm! Even if you don't picture yourself as one of the Roman soldiers that pierced Him, your sin required that to take place!
 - c. This is an important piece. I'm not trying to minimize in any way the sin of those who attempt to harm others in word or deed. However, when we are the victim of another's sin there can be a temptation to see that person as more worthy of judgment or less deserving of mercy from the Lord.
4. What if I am the one who wants to be feared in this way?
 - a. Repent—whether it is verbal or physical abuse.
 - b. Consider the impact of your sin, you may be acting out of perceived slights, pride, insecurity, etc. But your sin has an impact.
 - c. When you seek to harm others, whether intentionally or not, you are not only sinning yourself, you are tempting the other person to wrongly fear you. You are in a sense tempting others to change their theology, with your actions you are asking them to fear you instead of God. This is the real wickedness in harming others.

VI. Scriptural Examples and Responses to Fear of Physical Harm

Negative Examples:

Abraham (Genesis 12) specifically feared physical harm or death at the hand of Pharaoh and so decided to lie about Sarah being his wife. He feared man; it wasn't that he had been abused or harmed in some way. He feared future, potential harm and chose to lie and avoid.

The Israelites feared the report of the spies returning from scouting Canaan in Numbers 13:26-33. We see ten of the twelve spies that were sent into the Promised Land coming back and playing off the people's fear of physical harm from others, leading them to choose to not trust the Lord.

Peter is an example both negatively and positively. He is a man whom we can look to and be confident that there is grace and forgiveness to the fearful. We see Peter denying Christ at His trial because he feared what may befall him if others found out that he was a follower of Christ. (Luke 22:54-62) Notice the immediate shame and regret that accompanied his fearing man above God. Yet, we see that this same man would later tell Christians not to fear physical harm. In I Peter 3:13-15 he says, **“Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord.”**

Here are some more positive examples:

Joshua was one of only two of the twelve spies that sought to persuade the Israelites not to give into fear of physical harm. (Numbers 13) We see that the Lord blesses this trust and courage to face up to that fear by later encouraging Joshua to be strong and courageous. (Joshua 1)

Esther (Esther 5:1-8) knew that her proposal to King Xerxes regarding Haman and Mordecai could have resulted in her immediate death. Xerxes, as an absolute ruler, would have been accustomed to ordering the execution of those he decided should die--no appeal, no recourse to another branch of government. And yet, she showed great fear of the Lord and became an agent of blessing to her people.

Daniel and his friends, as recorded in the book of Daniel, chose to fear the Lord above the possibility of physical harm from people. And this was not some hypothetical possibility of fear. It was real. Fiery furnaces and ferocious felines.

David had many opportunities to give into the fear of man in relation to physical harm, yet we see him often responding with a deep fear of the Lord as he describes in Ps. 27, **“The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?”**

Paul was a man who caused physical harm to come upon Christians. He was a man who experienced great physical harm for the Gospel, anticipated facing future physical harm, prayed for confidence and not fear, and did face future harm and death. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-12:10, Paul outlines many of the things he had already suffered physically at the hands of others and concludes this discussion by saying **“For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”**

We see several things in **Hebrews 11**. We see several who had previously struggled with fear of physical harm now extolled for their great faith: Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Barak, and Samson. We see also (verses 35-40) graphic descriptions of those who didn't give in to the fear of physical harm, but faced incredible suffering and death for the sake of the Gospel: the writer of Hebrews saying of them that “the world was not worthy of them.”

And then there was **Jesus**. In Luke 9:22 He says, **“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”** He follows that, by saying that anyone who would follow Him must be willing to follow in this way. Later in the garden [Luke 22:42] he says, **“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless,**

not my will, but yours, be done.” He did not desire to face the cup of God’s wrath, the separation from His father and the pain and suffering that moment would entail. Yet, He did face those things, He did suffer, He did die, and now He is able to understand our temptations to fear. According to Hebrews 4:15-16 we see that **“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”** This truth empowers us to begin understanding how we can walk in trust and obedience in the fear of physical harm from other people. We follow one who knows this struggle.

VII. How can we respond biblically to the fear of man?

Fear of harm from other people is a real temptation and we can respond to this fear in a variety of ways. Our culture would have us convinced that we need to view this struggle from either a victim perspective or a stoic perspective. Such a perspective sees all fears and struggles excused as a result of the actions and sins of other people. The victim says, *“I have a right to feel this way because of what he or she did to me. How could I not fear that every man will treat me in this way after what I have gone through? How could I ever trust again after what my father did to me? How could I ever trust that group of people after what they did to me or those from my ethnic background? How can I not be paralyzed from living a normal life after that happened in my neighborhood?”*

Another typical response is to minimize the effect of this fear: a stoic or “stiff upper lip” approach. This perspective sees it as a sign of weakness to ever admit that you fear others in this manner. If I admit that I fear physical harm from others, doesn’t this open me to what I fear? Many of us have been affected and maybe are still affected by a secular approach to dealing with this type of fear. So, how do we begin to change? How does the Gospel begin to address this fear of harm?

1. We begin by recognizing that the worst harm has already been experienced: Christ’s atoning death for sins that He did not commit, in fact sins that those He created and sinned against Him committed. Yet, in giving His life, He didn’t fear the imminent physical harm from His creatures, but He trusted and feared His Father. Those of us who have experienced physical harm from others are able to more clearly understand how Christ suffered in this particular way.
2. The purpose of this course, the purpose of the Gospel is not to give us a way to escape these things, but rather to cause us to fear and trust the Lord more than we fear man. As we repent of our sins and trust in Christ, we realize that our sins necessitated His death. In that sense each of us has been responsible for physically harming another in the deepest way. We are forgiven as a result of what Christ has done for us. This forgiveness points the way towards forgiving others instead of fearing them.

We recognize that as we follow Christ we will face suffering; this is part of what it means to be a Christian. We will face physical harm, rejection, and shame if we follow the way of the Cross. The purpose of this course, the purpose of the Gospel is not to give us a way to escape these things, but rather to cause us to fear and trust the Lord more than we fear man.

3. The Gospel also brings us into membership in a new family. His church. A place where those who have been harmed, those who have caused harm, those who have feared, those who have

been feared, can all know reconciliation and fellowship because of forgiveness and mercy found through the One who gave Himself for us.

So, let's spend a few minutes thinking back over a couple of the ways we fear that others will harm us and let us think together about what it would mean for the Gospel to penetrate that fear. But let's think beyond merely how the Gospel allows us to correctly "handle" our fears and let's think about how our experience and fear of physical harm can actually serve to highlight and advance the Gospel. Let's think about this using a few of the categories we have already considered: the categories of physical abuse, verbal assaults and finally racism.

Responding to Physical abuse:

- The Lord will ultimately protect His children
- Any physical harm we encounter in this life is a part of God's sovereign and good plan for our lives: it is not random and not without purpose. This will also keep us from wrongly comparing our fear or experiences with those of others.
- We can forgive and love those who have harmed us because Christ has already done this for each of us.

Responding to Verbal abuse:

- Remember that Christ endured both physical harm, and verbal abuse, He understands.
- If actual physical harm can lead to a sense of victimization, the attack of verbal abuse can more often tend towards a stoic response.
- We respond like Christ, who didn't respond with counterassaults.
- We love and serve others, regardless of how we fear they may take advantage of our love.

Responding to Racism:

Within the body of Christ, we get the opportunity to demonstrate to all tongues/tribes/peoples/nations that our fear of those visibly different from us has been removed.

Questions or Comments?