

## Fear of Man and the Faithfulness of God

Proverbs 29:25

Faith Evangelical Free Church (Manhattan, KS)

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On April 23, 1910, former President Theodore Roosevelt gave what would become one of the most famous speeches of his career to a large crowd of several thousand people in Paris, France.

As “ministers in court dress, army and navy officers in full uniform, nine hundred students, and an audience of two thousand ticket holders”<sup>1</sup> crowded into the University of Paris, Roosevelt called out the cynics who judged, mocked, and looked down on men and women who were trying to make the world a better place simply by doing their best and working their hardest, even if only in the common, inglorious work of everyday life.

Roosevelt titled his speech, “Citizenship in a Republic” but it became more widely known as “The Man in the Arena”, after a line from one of its most stirring and powerful passages:

*"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."*

I think Roosevelt's words resonate with us and have thus far stood the test of time because they poignantly and plainly address an issue we have all likely struggled with at one point or another in our lives, and perhaps are even struggling with today: worrying about the opinions, perceptions, and criticisms of other people. And not just worrying about them, but becoming so overly concerned and consumed by what other people think that it begins to negatively impact our understanding of who we are and what we're worth.

Our craving for approval and dread of rejection pulls our attention away from what we think is true of ourselves and what we ought to do -- and more tragically, it pulls our attention away from God and what He says is true of us and what He desires for us to do -- and leaves us in the exhausting and disheartening position of always asking “what do other people want from me?” and “why don't I ever seem to be enough?”

If you've ever felt this way before, ever felt this pressure to endlessly perform and the burden to meet every expectation of every person you've ever encountered, then my hope for you this morning is to help you see and believe that this is not what our good and loving God wants for you. God doesn't want you to live your life plagued by what the Bible describes as “the fear of man”.

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Morris, *Colonel Roosevelt*

God's desire is for you to trust Him so deeply and completely that you no longer look to other people to find out if you measure up. Instead you look to our amazing God, remembering all He has done for you, and being satisfied by His evaluation, approval, and even at times His loving command to repentance and correction.

Our struggles with what other people think about us is perhaps not surprisingly a fairly common topic in the Bible. There are many passages we could look to for wisdom and guidance with this issue, but one that stands out for its simplicity and clarity is Proverbs 29:25 (NIV).

*"Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD will be kept safe."*

Proverbs 29:25 (NIV)

Throughout the Bible the phrase ***"fear of man" is used to describe an unhealthy preoccupation with what people think about you, how they talk about you, or the way they feel about you.***

Before we go too much further I think it's helpful to make clear that this passage ***does not say*** that your reputation doesn't matter at all. Elsewhere in the book of Proverbs we learn that ***"A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold."*** (22:1). And in the New Testament both Peter and Paul remind us that we should ***"keep our behavior excellent among the Gentiles"*** (1 Peter 2:12) and have ***"a good reputation with those outside the church"*** (1 Timothy 3:7) so that our witness of the Gospel will have a better chance of being welcome in the places we live and with the people we meet.

So having a good reputation is important, but it is *not the most important*. The danger we're looking at today is what happens when we prioritize our reputation with others so much so that the fear of man -- ***the unhealthy preoccupation with what people think about us, how they talk about us, or the way they feel about us*** -- dominates our concerns, impacts our decisions, and even takes the place of God in our lives.

The tricky thing about our struggle against the fear of man is that it's more of a trap we fall into than conscious, intentional decision that we make. Very few of us probably wake up in the morning and think, "Gee, I really hope I get to fill my day obsessing over what others say about me." Proverbs calls the fear of man a snare -- a relational noose or net, hidden along the paths of our day and waiting to cinch around our hearts and weigh them down.

This trap likely looks different for each of us. For some, perhaps there's a relationship from your past that makes you feel you must constantly prove yourself each and every day to be worthy of love.

For others, peer pressure may be your snare -- you've got to look the right way, have the right friends, post the right pictures, pick the right Greek House, party with those who party, compete with those who compete, and never fail to make the grade, or the team, or deliver flawlessly at your place of work on time every time.

Maybe you've got parents to make proud, in-laws you feel judge your every move, or maybe you feel trapped by a social pressure attached to you job, gender, or some other role.

These days it seems like there is no shortage of professional criticizers, blog writers, or social media followers who are all too ready to tell you not only how you **could** be better at everything, but how you **SHOULD** be better at everything, and everyone agrees that you need to step it up.

So these are the traps...but what are the dangers?

It's important to ask that question because one of the things we typically do when we feel trapped by the expectations of others is just try to play it off like it's not big deal. Y'all ever done this?

It can be something small and subtle, like laughing at a joke that makes fun of you because everyone else is laughing and you don't want to be a thought of as a poor sport. Or maybe it's something much bigger like remaining in an unhealthy relationship because you're afraid of what your family and friends might say or think of you if sought out help or left.

When we fall into the trap of the fear of man and accept it as normal, we often inadvertently justify being treated poorly, treating others poorly, or even treating ourselves poorly. And all of that can open the door to making some really dangerous personal, emotional, and even spiritual decisions.

Let's take a few minutes and consider what some of those decisions might be. What is it that can happen to us when we get wrapped up in and fixated on the opinions of other people?

**One of the most common dangers associated with the fear of man is making it a priority to please people instead of pleasing God.**

Growing up I was what you might have called a pretty stereotypical "good church kid." I attended Bible studies, never missed youth group, volunteered all over the church as often as I could, and frequently overheard people telling my parents what a nice you man I was becoming. (Boy did THAT do great things for my ego)

On top of all this I got pretty good grades, earned the rank of Eagle Scout, tried to be someone my friends could always depend on, and almost never said "no" to someone in need. I carried all these traits with me though high school and on into college, ever committed to doing my best to be the best person I could in the eyes of others.

I worked hard to make sure other people saw me doing well. I worked hard to make sure people liked me. I worked hard to make sure that if it was within my power to do so, I made people happy.

And all the while, I also worked very hard to make sure that nobody ever discovered that I wasn't sure God liked me, and that I was suffering from and trying to hide a bunch of struggles with sin.

I knew I wanted a better relationship with God and I knew I needed to seek his forgiveness for my sin. Problem was, I also knew I wasn't going to be able to do any of that alone but I was far too afraid that I'd make people unhappy if I told them about my struggles. For years the fear of disappointing people -- my friends, my family, my parents, my pastors -- outweighed my fear of disappointing God. Somewhere in my mind and in my heart I convinced myself that as long as the people around me were happy with who they thought I was, then I could work on my issues and my relationship with God later.

Fellow people-pleasers, listen up; here's the truth: "later" never comes on its own. As long as your priority remains to please people, then your relationship with God will struggle.

In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul delivers a startling warning to believers who are tempted by the desire to prioritize pleasing people over seeking God:

*[10] For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

(Galatians 1:10 ESV)

When we're dealing with the dangers of the fear of man, the stakes could not be higher. Our **unhealthy preoccupation with what people think about us, how they talk about us, or the way they feel about us** does serious damage to our relationship with God. In her book *Fear and Faith*, Trilla Newbell makes this clear:

*"Tragically, you and I deny Christ every time we care more about what others think of us than what God has already declared. Every time we seek man's approval and praise, we say to the Lord that His sacrifice was not enough."*

That's the real danger of people-pleasing: every time we seek someone's approval and praise over that of God's, we tell Jesus his life, death, and resurrection are not enough.

But this is not the only danger related to our fear of man. In addition to people-pleasing, our **unhealthy preoccupation with what people think about us, how they talk about us, or the way they feel about us** can also lead us to commit our lives to **the pursuit of our own glory and our own gain**.

The truth is, we wouldn't worry about what other people think if didn't believe there was something to be gained by doing so. And if we're being honest, there is a payoff the fear of man: you can gain a tiny bit of meaningless, temporary, mortal glory.

It'll feel great for the 15 minutes, or even 15 years that you have it...but ultimately and eternally it cannot satisfy or save you and choosing your own glory will always leave you on the wrong side of redemptive history.

In the Gospel of John, Chapter 12, Jesus enters into the city of Jerusalem with great excitement and fanfare. He settles in and begins to teach anyone who will come to him -- Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, all the while performing miracles the likes of which the world had never seen before. It begins to dawn on some people that maybe, just maybe, this Jesus guy really means it when he says that he is the Messiah. And they want to believe, they get really close to doing so...but then they determine that the cost is too high.

*[42] Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; [43] for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.*

John 12:42-43 (ESV)

Love for the glory of man destroys your chance at a rich, full, and glorious relationship with God. You can't have both, but you do have a choice: between the infinite glory of God and the finite, fickle glory that comes from the praise of people.

If all you want is the cheap praise from someone who could just as easily be your #1 fan today and your enemy tomorrow...God says fine, go for it. But if you want to pursue the glorious One who will never leave you or forsake you, then you have to stop chasing what people have to offer and start working on **the one thing that can free you from the trap of the fear of man: actively and intentionally building trust with God.**

*(Or, if you're like me and you like symmetry your sermons, you need a healthy preoccupation with the what God thinks about you, has declared true about you, and with the way he feels about you...which, by the way, is really good.)*

*"Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD will be kept safe."*

Isn't it interesting that the author of Proverbs does NOT say that the remedy for the fear of man is found within ourselves?

Fighting back against our obsession with how people think about us, talk about us, and feel about us...doesn't actually have very much to do with us at all -- at least not in the way the world would often have us believe.

"Just be yourself", improve yourself, or even change yourself might be our culture's solution to winning people over and maintaining your reputation, but God has an altogether different approach He'd like you to consider: don't focus on other people, and don't even focus on yourself. Trust in the Lord -- who He is, what He's promised, what He's done for you, and what He says to be true about you -- and rest easy in the safety of His presence and peace.

This summer my wife and I took a vacation to Chicago. While we were there we checked out the view from the 103rd floor of the tallest building in the western hemisphere -- the Willis Tower (or, if you're a traditionalist, you might rather call it the Sears Tower).

The view from 1,353 feet is really quite amazing...but that's not the Willis Tower's greatest attraction. Once you're up there, you can walk out onto the SkyDeck: an all-glass room extending 4.5 feet out from the side of the building. Meaning that you can stand 1,353 feet above the streets of Chicago with nothing but a few inches of glass beneath your shoes.

Did we try it? You bet we did! (Show photo)

I'll be honest, it's a little intimidating to step out onto that see-through ledge. I had to psych myself up a bit to get it done. So I walked up edge where the steel of the building meets the glass of the Skydeck and thought, "Okay, you can do this, because you are a fairly brave person who is not afraid of heights."

My feet did not move.

"Hmm...well, not only are you okay with heights, but if you don't everyone is going to know you went all the way up to the 103rd floor and got cold feet. So, time to save face, out you go!"

My feet were as still as the very reliable steel I apparently was not ready to abandon.

"Alright, well the chances of the glass floor breaking underneath you are probably pretty slim. It was designed by super smart architects and engineers, built by expert craftsman, and I bet it's even inspected on a regular basis by people with fancy licenses to do so. They wouldn't let people out there if they didn't feel it was safe, so...step out."

And finally, that got me moving. And after just the briefest wave of vertigo, I enjoyed the rest of my time standing, leaning, and yes even reading while suspended 103 floors in the air. All it took was a little remembering to have a little confidence in the people who had created the Skydeck, who I trusted to know a lot more than me when it comes to preventing glass rooms from plummeting off the sides of buildings.

Rehearsing and remembering why we trust who we trust can be an excellent way to not only recall the reasons we trust someone, but to build up more trust in the moments when we need that boost the most. It worked for me in Chicago...can it work for us when it comes to God? What has God promised you, and how has He proven Himself faithful to those promises? Join me for a moment in remembering the faithfulness of God:

*[13] And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today...[14] The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."*

(Exodus 14:13–14 ESV)

*[6] Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you."*

(Deuteronomy 31:6 ESV)

*[5] Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free. [6] The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? [7] The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.*

(Psalm 118:5–7 ESV)

*[16] "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. [17] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

(John 3:16–17 ESV)

*[1] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. [2] And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [3] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. [4] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."*

(Revelation 21:1–4 ESV)

Why is it that “*Whoever trusts in the Lord will be kept safe*”? Because all this, and so much more, is the power, and the might, and the love, and the promise of our God and all of it, all of Him, is totally and completely for us. God says you are loved, you are worthy, that you may have at one time been a sinner and an enemy but now in Christ you are his child, his heir, his beloved son or daughter.

This past week I was reading James 1 with my life group, and came across something amazing in 1:18

*[18] Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*

(James 1:18 ESV)

Just because he wanted to, God saved us and remade us into what he considers to be the very best of his creation. And God has made some pretty amazing things -- The Konza Prairie, the Rocky Mountains, fields full of flowers, sunrises and sunsets...I mean, God made dogs, you guys, and yet still what he says about you is this: you are his beloved, his best. That's why the Psalmist can ask with no fear and total joy in his heart “I've got God on my side, so what can man do to me?”

Like any other relationship, building trust requires some work. You've got to put some effort behind it. The good news is you can start small, and even a little bit of trust can go a long way. So this week, I encourage you to do the following:

- Spend some time reflecting on how God has been faithful in your life. What has he saved you from? What has he blessed you with? When have you felt his presence or his love, and what was that like?
- Pick a passage of Scripture that reminds you of the faithfulness of God, and try to commit it to memory. If Scripture memorization really isn't your thing that's okay -- write it down on a notecard and keep it somewhere you'll see it and read it every day.
- If you struggle with either people pleasing or glory chasing, TALK TO SOMEONE ABOUT IT. You cannot do this alone. Track down one of the pastors, call up a mentor, reach out to someone in a life group, confess your struggles to a friend. Don't hide it all away in your heart.

Build up your trust in God, remember what he has done for you, remember and dwell on what he says is true about you and I believe you will begin to find yourself craving and needing the approval of people less and less, and delighting in the approval of God more and more.