

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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How do we Teach Someone the Fear of God?

Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the LORD. What man is he that desireth life, and loveth many days, that he may see good? Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it. (Psalm 34:11-14)

Scripture is clear that we do not “teach” someone to know God. In Jeremiah 31:27-34 God describes a major premise of His “new covenant” with His people in these terms. They shall not teach every man his brother or neighbor to “know the Lord,” for they shall all know Him from the least to the greatest. God teaches us to “know” Him; He does not delegate that task to others. However, our passage specifically affirms that the fear of God is not only teachable, but that we should make it a priority issue in our active faith.

How do we teach someone else to “fear God”? Given the frightening ignorance of many Christians regarding the whole question of fearing God, I doubt that this theme appears in the “curriculum” of most Christian lives, much less Christian institutions of education. Get a copy of the class offerings from a local Christian college or high school. Do you see any courses offered on the fear of God? Sit for a season under most preaching in any Christian denomination, even the most conservative. In some of them you’ll hear an excess of teaching on the fear of consequences, on the fear of hell and the dreadfulness of eternal punishment, but you’ll hear very little indeed about what it means to fear God. Do we understand that fearing the punishment of hell is not the same as fearing God? That attitude refers to fearing the consequences of sin, but it has almost nothing to do with fearing God. You can find any number of people who fear the punishment that the Bible describes for the wicked. Who wouldn’t fear it? But you find few people indeed who have a solid grasp on the Biblical idea of fearing God, much less teaching that fear to others in His family.

What man is he that desireth life, and loveth many days, that he may see good? David begins his “teaching” with a question. Ah, few teaching methods work as well as asking questions. They engage the mind of the student. They make the student part of the learning process. This question is engaging. Who doesn’t desire the good life, longevity, and a “happy ending” to his life?

Unfortunately, more happy endings occur in fairy tales than in real life. Why is it that so many lives are spent in constant struggle and end in frustration? If you suggested to people who live life in this mode that they may be suffering from a deficiency in their fear of God, they’d look at you as if you were mad. They wouldn’t even grasp why you made the statement at all. What does that have to do with their frustrations? According to David in this lesson, it may well have everything to do with our struggles. The form of the question acknowledges the universal appeal of a long and fulfilling life to our minds. The question also leads us to expect that we shall receive a positive answer. David will tell us how to ensure these fruits in our life work. The surprise of the passage is that he associates a long, happy life to our fear of God, something that he promises to teach us.

A careful study of David’s answer to the “teacher’s question” will reveal the rigors of the course entitled “Learning the Fear of God.” Most students in school score well below their intelligence and true ability because they refuse to invest the self-control and mental energy to truly do their homework and related assignments. They learn just how much they need to do to “get by.” They are satisfied with a “get by” grade. Sadly, many of these people leave school and spend the remainder of their lives in that same “get by” mode. They could do their work—and practice their faith—at a far higher level of skill and devotion with more effort, but they have become content with just “getting by.” Many years ago a friend who had been very dedicated to his faith developed Alzheimer’s disease. As the disease increasingly altered his personality, one day he volunteered to me, “It just doesn’t take as much religion for me as it does for most people.” At least this man had something of an excuse. The disappointment of ministry is that many professing believers who do not suffer from debilitating dementia have embraced a similar attitude.

How do you explain this lackadaisical attitude in people who profess to “seek first the kingdom of God”? Their obvious attitude toward their faith is far from making it first in their life’s priorities. We hardly realize the profound impact that early habits and attitudes make on our whole life.

I offer a rather simple observation regarding this verse and its amazing implications to authentic, robust Christian living. People with this attitude of doing just enough to “get by” either do not fear God as they should, or they certainly do not demonstrate the fear of God in their lives as they should. Not only can they not teach anyone to fear God, they lack the personal experience of a healthy fear of God and its cleansing, freeing impact on their conduct.

Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. David begins with one of the most common and *accepted* sins of Christianity, gossip. The incurable gossip fails the fear of God course right away. The cliché that the eyes are the window to one’s soul is partly correct, but perhaps one’s tongue provides a clearer view of the soul than the eyes. Quietly listen to what people say for very long, and you will readily grasp what is important to them, as well as their patterns of thought. Regardless of their efforts to keep up a flawless façade, they inevitably reveal their deepest attitudes for all to see.

Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it. The parallel thoughts in these two clauses are instructive. People readily agree that we should depart from evil, at least as they define evil. I suggest that Christians should define evil based on God’s values, not their own. Parallel to departing from evil is the companion assignment of doing good. David doesn’t simply tell us that avoidance of disgraceful sins is acceptable; he tells us that we should engage our life and conduct that was formerly filled with evil-doing in the active pursuit of doing good. Doing good involves a moral-ethical factor. It also involves an attitude factor in us. Doing good involves our joyful and happy embracing of the Christian life as something to be treasured and enjoyed, not joylessly endured as if a prison sentence.

Seek peace, and pursue it. We suffer a lot of confusion in our Christian faith. Yes, Paul compares the Christian life with the life of a soldier at war (Ephesians 6). There are two essentials to being a good soldier. The first requires absolute respect for, and submission to, one’s superior officer. You may not agree with his orders, but in the heat of battle, you obey without question. The other essential of being a worthy soldier is to know your enemy. Most heated

battlefields involve a lot of confusion and emotion. People are being wounded and are dying all around you. Your own life is on the line. The next bullet that is fired may find its way to you, not that soldier adjacent to you. In all the confusion and tension of the battle you must always keep the identity of your enemy clearly in your mind. One could hardly imagine a worse travesty than for a soldier to wound or kill one of his comrades due to mistaking him for the enemy.

As Christians, we demonstrate incredible confusion regarding the identity of our enemy. A Christian in a different church denomination or fellowship whose beliefs may differ from mine on various doctrines is not my enemy. A believer within my church or fellowship who announces ideas that are somewhat different from the dominant ideas within the fellowship is not my enemy. If he holds to ideas too diverse from the fellowship or church, perhaps he should find a church fellowship that is more compatible with his ideas, but he is not my enemy.

Many large churches today put all their focus on getting new converts through the front door, but they pay almost no attention to the mass exodus of existing members out the back door of the church. Many of these exiting Christians leave with scars and open infected wounds in their spirit due to the thoughtless actions of a fellow-believer. We are too proficient at wounding our own, at confusing a believer, a soldier in Paul’s metaphor of the Christian life, all the while leaving our arch-enemy free to move in on our compromised battle posture. In Ephesians 6 Paul makes a clear point of identifying the Christian’s enemy. He is not another believer who lives in flesh and blood. He is a spirit being who does not have flesh and blood. Our battle should not go on inside the camp of believers, even when our various beliefs differ.

I do not minimize doctrinal differences, particularly differences that touch on major Biblical issues. However, I urge us all to take a serious look at the New Testament’s defined strategy for dealing with them, kind and gentle methods more conducive to a difference within a family than methods commonly seen on a battlefield. Based on David’s lesson, our failure to follow these ethical strategies demonstrates an alarming fact. We lack a healthy fear of God, leaving us altogether incompetent to teach others the fear of God. David’s simple syllabus for the fear-of-God course requires that we demonstrate our fear of God, a clean and wholesome fear, by the way that we speak and live our lives. *Our assignment is not to take the class but to teach it.* Are we ready?

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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