

Balance Fear of the Lord and the Love of God

This is all wonderful, but in the midst of this I had a question from a young guy in one of my community groups (I lead two), “What role does the fear of the Lord have under grace?”

Good question.

Proverbs 1:7 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” How do we balance this with New Testament passages like 1 John 4:16-18? “God is love...There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.”

The engine of legalism is fear. The engine of grace is love.

Legalism says do. Grace says done.

Unbiblical fear of the Lord is deadly. How do we flee toxic fear and embrace the genuine article?

First of all, let’s try to define these ideas. To be brief, I’d say that unbiblical fear of the Lord is that which causes you to doubt God’s love or the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice. Unbiblical fear makes you insecure, condemned, and legalistic. Healthy fear of the Lord esteems what God esteems and agrees with God about all things. What God is serious about, we are serious about. What God hates, we hate. This biblical fear of the Lord raises your respect for God, deepens your worship, and motivates you to avoid sin.

That said, here’s some thoughts on the balance between grace and the fear of the Lord.

1. The fear of the Lord leads you to grace.

If you will not call the same thing sin that God calls sin, fear His wrath and judgment, and despair in your ability to save yourself, you will never understand grace, let alone reach out for it. The fear of the Lord opens your eyes to the seriousness of His Law, awfulness of His judgment, and the terror of @#!*% . Grace appears glorious when we fear the Lord.

2. The fear of the Lord causes you to examine yourself to see if you are in the faith.

2 Corinthians 13:5 says, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” Likewise, Philippians 2:12 says, “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” Both of these Scriptures encourage us to examine ourselves to be sure that we have trusted in the right gospel for our salvation. *“For it is God who works in you.”* We

are warned not to put our faith in the wrong object—works, denominations, rituals, circumcision, etc.—but to make sure that we have put our faith entirely and solely in the cross to save us. With the wrath of God in view, we are wise to purposely question our salvation and examine the fruits of our lives to see if there are evidences of being under grace, but *only* for the reason of avoiding false gospels and for enjoying the assurance of knowing we are in Christ.

3. The fear of the Lord reminds you of temporal punishment.

We won't be punished for sin in eternity, but we will be punished on earth. The 1 John 4 passage, and other passages like it, assure us that if we are in Christ, we are not to fear eternal punishment, because Christ drank the entire cup of God's wrath (John 3:16-18). Even so, the Bible also says in Galatians 6:7-8, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." We will not be punished in the next life, but in this one, since the kingdom is both "now" and "not yet," we will continue to see severe consequences for sinful behavior. The fear of the Lord will help us to avoid this. Knowing that God punishes sin will help us to avoid it.

We may compare the fear of the Lord to the fear that a child might have for a father. Just as there is a perverted version of this fear if the father is abusive and cruel, so a misguided Christian may see God that way and may be paralyzed with toxic fear. Conversely, just as a loved child with a good father will still respect, honor, and obey their father, so it is with a child of God. Further, a loved child knows that their father will never disown them or leave them, yet this does not diminish the desire to avoid punishment from disobedience. Likewise, God will never (ever) disown His children, and this fact should not keep us from obeying Him or living good lives.

May God give all of us the grace to love and fear Him in a way that will grow us up in the faith until we are strong and confident in Christ.

by Derek Levendusky posted 03.09.2011