

knew that he could never please everyone or even please the same person all of the time. People may want one thing on one day and want something completely different the next day. They may want what others want when it comes to big issues, but in the end, they most often want what's best for them and their tribe. They want people who will help their cause, so as soon as someone doesn't help their cause any more, they'll move on to the next person. Jesus had such clarity about what God had called him to do and such clarity about how fickle people were that he not only did not fear man's wrath, even more impressively, he didn't crave man's approval. Let me share a few other verses and then we'll be done.

Fear of Man/God

Proverbs 29:25 says, "The fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe." What's the snare? The snare is not only that the fear of man will leave you running on a hamster wheel trying to please people, but it's also a snare because the fear of man distracts us from trusting God, and trusting God is the only way to be kept safe. Even if we don't try to deliberately disobey God, we can't be focused on pleasing people and hope at the same time to please God and trust him and receive his protection. Living in response to the fear of man leaves us vulnerable.

Isaiah 2 describes how God's mountain will be established and will become the center of the world, with all of the nations flowing to it. Interestingly, it's the idols of those very nations that God's people had begun to worship. In Isaiah 2:22, God says, "Stop regarding man, in whose nostrils is breath, for what account is he?" God reminds his people that the people they fear are humans, those into whose nostrils God breathed the breath of life, the same ones who would return to dust in death. Why not trust in the one who breathed life into all humans? Why not trust in the sovereign creator of the universe because no matter how great the man, he is still only a man.

Finally, 1 Samuel 15 gives us an example of how costly the fear of man can be. Samuel told King Saul to destroy the Amalekites completely—to leave absolutely nothing and no one behind. Saul gathered troops and went and successfully defeated the Amalekites, but spared their king and the best of the sheep, oxen, fattened calves, and lambs. When Samuel confronted Saul about all of the animals he could hear, Saul said, "The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God, but we totally destroyed the rest." Samuel told Saul that partial obedience is disobedience, even if you're willing to sacrifice some of the bounty of your disobedience. 1 Samuel 15:22 says, "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams." In 1 Samuel 15:24, Saul comes clean and explains what ensnared him. He says, "I have sinned. I violated the LORD'S command and your instructions because I feared the people and so I gave in to them." Saul got caught trying to do what we often get caught trying to do—trying to obey God enough to keep him happy while also trying to please men enough to keep them happy. But it doesn't work. Let me draw a few conclusions for us.

Conclusions

Living our lives in the fear of man is short-sighted in light of eternity. Because we are temporal, we easily lose sight of eternity, even for those of us who are more experienced at being temporal. We easily forget that what we do here and now will have a dramatic effect on how we spend eternity. We easily adopt temporal values rather than eternal ones because we fear man or crave his approval. We need to be reminded that living our lives in the fear of man is short-sighted in light of eternity.

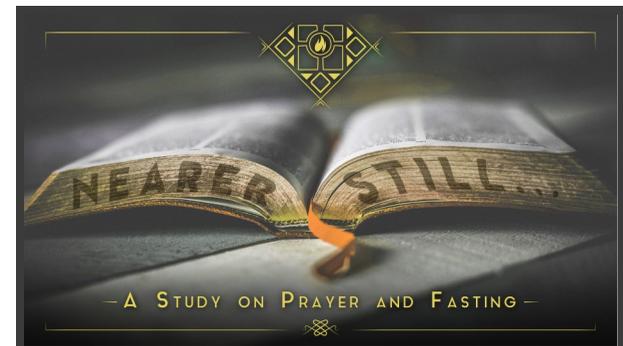
Living our lives in the fear of man betrays our lack of trust in God's ability to defend us and protect us. If God can and does sustain each and every bird no matter how common and ordinary, he

can and will sustain us, defend us, and preserve us if we fear him and thus obey him. Think of the stories of the apostles, like Peter, who was put in jail and scheduled for execution, but God released him because he did not fear man, but God. When we fear man to the point that we're willing to disobey and dishonor God, we have forgotten who God is and what he does.

Living our lives in the fear of man can mean that we live our lives craving man's approval. This is probably more relevant to us because at least right now, we're not being called upon to give our lives for the sake of Christ. But you may have to give up your influence, your popularity, or your reputation because you refuse to live in the fear of man. In our culture, you may get canceled. You may have to live with the approval of God and not of man. Whatever the case, we cannot live in the fear of man and the fear of God at the same time.

Living our lives in the fear of man is foolish because man is a creature just like we are. We live in a celebrity culture. We live in a viral culture. We have influencers and cultural icons and so often, even though it has nothing to do with who they are or what they know, their opinion is hugely disproportional to that of others. However, it doesn't matter how popular someone is, how many followers they have, how many sponsorships they receive, they are still human.

Living our lives in the fear of man will lead us to disobey God and lose his blessing. It's easy to look at Saul and think he was pathetic because we know that's what we're supposed to think, but the truth is that I'm more like him than I would like to admit and that's probably true for you as well. It's so easy to compromise what God has told us to do even just what feels like a little bit in order to keep others happy—in order to avoid the harm others can do to us or receive the praise they might be willing to give us.



February 7, 2021

Pastor Jared Stoner



www.wcag.org

Nearer Still #5

February 7, 2021

Pastor Jared Stoner

Good morning. It's great to welcome everyone this morning, whether you're here in person or joining us online. We dedicated the month of January to prayer, fasting, and seeking the Lord in our sermon series called Nearer Still. However, January is done, but I don't feel like we're done with the topic, so we're going to continue talking about various aspects of drawing nearer to God. This morning, I want to talk about another obstacle to drawing nearer to God and that is the fear of man, or the fear of people.

You might remember that in a previous sermon, I talked about pride as one of the biggest obstacles to drawing near to God, that Scripture, in fact, says that God opposes the proud. The fear of man is a different, but similar problem. Pride causes us to think too highly of ourselves and therefore, too little of God. The fear of man causes us to think too highly of other people and therefore, too little of God. So, this morning, I want us to look at a number of Scriptures that tease out the problems we encounter when we live our lives in response to the fear of man. Let's begin by looking at some verses in Matthew 10.

Body/Soul (Matthew 10:21-23, 26-31)

Matthew 10:21-23 says, ²¹*“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. 22All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. 23When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”*

Dropping down to verses 26-31, it says, ²⁶*“So do*

not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. 27What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. 28Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. 30And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

In Matthew 10, Jesus warned his disciples that times were going to get tough, that Jesus would become such a divisive person that even the very strongest and deepest relationships would be divided. Brothers would turn against brothers, parents against children, children against parents, even to the point of having them put to death. In response to that, Jesus doesn't tell his disciples to run away or hide, or to be secretive or sophisticated, but simply to proclaim “that which was from the beginning, which [they had] heard, which [they had] seen with [their] eyes, which [they had] looked at and [their] hands[had] touched (1John 1:1).” Given the fact, then, that Jesus would become divisive to the point of people putting each other to death, and the fact that Jesus told his disciples to openly proclaim the truth of who he was, it's clear that the disciples were headed for significant conflict. As a result, Jesus instructed his disciples about what to do when they were confronted by those who were hostile to their message.

In verse 28, then, Jesus tells his disciples, “28Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” There are three points I want to make here. One, Jesus is realistic about the fact that while we shouldn't live our lives in the fear of man, we fear men for a very good reason—they can be treacherous, brutal, and deadly. They can, to use Jesus' phrase, kill the body and sometimes in the most unpleasant ways. Sometimes when we know what Jesus

thinks about a topic, it's easy to agree with him and make it seem like only a knuckle dragger would think differently. But here's the truth: we fear people for a reason. To pretend otherwise is disingenuous.

Two, while recognizing that the fear of man is evidence-based and rational, Jesus makes the case that living your life in response to the fear of man is the result of a profoundly skewed perspective because the damage people can do to the body in this life is nothing compared to the damage God can do to the body and the soul in eternity. It's true that people can hurt us in some pretty unthinkable ways, but what they can do is limited because whatever else happens, we'll eventually die or they'll die and at that point, there is nothing more that can happen to us. However, when you consider the ramifications of eternity with God versus eternity apart from God, the suffering people can inflict is exponentially less by comparison. To fall under the wrath, or judgment, of humans can be terrifying for a time. But to fall under the wrath of the eternal, sovereign God for all eternity, is a whole different matter. Not only, Jesus says, God able to kill the body, but he can kill both the body and soul in hell forever.

Three, Jesus says that God is sovereign over, and pays attention to, even the smallest details of life on our planet, so there is no need to worry that anything will happen apart from his will. The two examples Jesus gives are the death of a sparrow and the number of hairs on our head. Not a single sparrow falls to the ground in even the remotest places of the earth, apart from God's will. If that's true, God is able to sustain us even in the midst of the worst people can do to us. What's more, God knows each one of us so well that he knows the number of hairs on our head. If so, God is able to provide everything each of us needs to be sustained in the midst of the worst that people can do to us. In other words, people can do horrible things to us if we refuse to please them instead of God, but given the eternal implications of doing so and the fact that God will sustain us no matter what happens, to live our lives in the fear of man

rather than the fear of God is foolish. To bring it back to our topic of drawing nearer to God, we'll never be able to draw nearer to God if we live our lives in the fear of men. You can't do both, which we'll read about in just a few minutes. Before we get there, I want to take a look at John 2:23-25, where Jesus gives us another reason to not live our lives in response to the fear of man.

What's Inside People (John 2:23-25)

John 2:23-25 says, “23Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. 24But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. 25He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.”

I want to make just a couple of points from this passage. However, in order to understand John 2:23-25, we have to pay attention to a couple of the details. Jesus is in the capital city, Jerusalem, not some back woods fishing town up north. Jesus is gaining popularity on a much bigger stage. His brand is taking off and people are starting to fawn over him and pay attention to him. It would be easy to change what he did and said as a result, but Jesus didn't because he knew people. Here's what we see in this passage. [*we can...*] One, we can live our lives in response to the fear of man because we want their approval, not just because we fear their disapproval. When it says Jesus didn't entrust himself to people, it means that he neither feared their disapproval nor craved their approval because Jesus was completely free from the fear of man. Jesus lived his life for the pleasure of the Father.

Two, Jesus didn't live his life in response to the fear of men because he knew what was in their hearts. And when I say their heart, I mean our heart, because as fallen human beings, we can all be fickle, capricious, and selfish. Jesus knew that people are fickle, capricious, and selfish. Jesus