

August 18, 2024
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

John 6:51–69 (Proverbs 9:1–10; Ephesians 5:6–21)

THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

What is it that you *fear* the most? Is it high places? Close spaces? Spiders and snakes? Psychologists say that while *fear* is learned through direct threatening experiences, it is also learned by observation and verbal warnings. Verbal warnings like when your teacher yelled at you for talking in class... or when you hear the words: “*Thou shalt not do this.*” *Thou shalt not do that.*”

As a typical male adolescent, I probably wasn’t paying attention in Catechism class when my pastor was catechizing us regarding the “*fear of the Lord,*” because when I heard: “*We should fear and love God so that we do not _____* (fill in the blank)” I thought God was an angry God who was waiting on me to brake one of His Commandments so He could pour out His wrath and squish me like a bug.

Some preachers proclaim this type of *fear of the Lord*, intending that the *fear* of God’s wrath will cause the hearer to strive harder to enter the narrow gate of heaven by their own works and deeds. (cf: Matthew 7:13) But what happens in many cases is, their hearers reject God and His boundless love and mercy because they know they cannot keep His Law as He demands. Those preachers are wrong. I was wrong. I had the wrong idea what it meant to *fear* the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is a key concept throughout the Old Testament. Unfortunately, the Hebrew word that we translate as *fear* cannot be defined in just one English word. And like some English words, depending on the context, it can have the opposite contradictory meaning. So while, indeed, there are times in Scripture when the word *fear* has a negative connotation, meaning, to be afraid of something or someone, (cf: Genesis 9:2, 26:7, 32:11) there are many other times when referring to a person of high position, the word *fear* takes on the idea of standing in awe or reverence before that individual. It is in that sense that we should *fear and love God*. He’s God after all. He’s your Creator and your Savior. He’s the all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present, loving Lord God who sustains His creation, making the sun rise on both the good and evil – and sending rain on the just and the unjust. (cf: Matthew 5:45)

On the one hand, it is true that God threatens to punish all who break His Commandments. Therefore, we should *fear* His wrath and not do anything against them. In our Epistle text St Paul emphasizes this by saying:

“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.” (Ephesians 5:6)

Just the serpent deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden, unbelieving Ephesians were tempting the Ephesian Christians to turn away from honoring God and return to the fleshly pleasures of their old way of life – just as the devil tries to tempt and deceive you today. Paul sets the Ephesian Christians apart from the unbelievers. They are no longer among the ***sons of disobedience*** but ***baptized sons of Christ***. The ***sons of disobedience*** are condemned by their unbelieving behavior and the wrath of God will come upon them because of their unbelief and rejection of Christ Jesus. So Paul writes this word of warning to those already saved by grace through faith so that they ***do not*** lose sight of the need for ultimate deliverance from the wrath to come, which is available only through Christ Jesus. (cf: Winger, Ephesians, Concordia Commentary, 558–559) Jesus says:

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” (John 3:36)

But on the other hand, the ***fear of God*** is honoring and reverencing God, trusting in Him for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, while, in the words of St. Paul, strive to:

“... cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1)

In Baptism you are a new creation and have died to sin. (cf: Romans 6:2) Your old self was crucified with Christ in order that you would no longer be enslaved to sin but be set free from sin. (cf: Romans 6:6–7) Because God did not send his Son into the world to condemn you and the world, but in order that you and the world might be saved through Him, you have reverent and respectful ***fear of God***.

To truly ***fear the Lord*** is to recognize that He is infinitely above all creation – the visible and invisible. It’s to reverence Him as the One and only true God who demonstrated His rich love and mercy by sending His Son to keep all His Commandments perfectly in your stead. He sent the Bread of Life into this broken and sinful world so that you might eat of Him and live forever. (cf: John 6:51)

The ***fear of the Lord*** is not running away or cowering under your covers in terror. In the Introit this morning you heard the words of the Psalmist singing:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.” (Psalm 111:10)

In our Old Testament text you heard:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” (Proverbs 9:10)

In the Gradual you heard:

“... fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack!” (Psalm 34:9)

The ***fear of the Lord*** is recognizing that there is a God – but you’re not Him. It’s recognizing that however good you ***think*** you are... you’re by nature a sinner. You might be the nicest and

kindest person in your social circle, but apart from faith in Christ Jesus, you're **not** good enough to enter the Kingdom of God.

You need a Savior, and that Savior is **not** you. That Savior is Christ Jesus alone. You think you're capable. You might be completely self-sufficient, and your life can't get any better. But that's only what you see on the outside. What you **cannot** see is your sin sick soul.

Just as your fleshly body needs food and drink to **maintain** your fleshly life, your soul needs spiritual food and drink to preserve your spiritual life. Your hungering and thirsting soul needs Jesus' Word. His Word gives spirit and life. Jesus Himself is the Bread of Life and He is the source of eternal life. In our Gospel text:

“Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.” (John 6:53–55)

What you ate for breakfast will sustain you until lunch. What you eat after the service today and at lunch will sustain you until your next meal. But even after all of this eating, your fleshly body will still hunger and one day, die. So, while you were still a sinner, the Bread of Life came down from heaven so that you might eat of it and live eternally.

It's a hard saying. The Jews grumbled. They were offended. How could Jesus suggest that people eat of His body and drink of His blood? But it's not only the Jews in our text who're offended. Today many Christians are offended and use theological and grammatical gymnastics to change God's Word. Some say that Jesus is **not physically** present in the Lord's Supper. They say that when Jesus said, *“this is my body”* and *“this is my blood,”* He was using **figurative** language. Others say the Sacrament of the Altar is nothing more than a memorial meal.

As confessional Lutheran Christians, when the Bible says that Holy Scripture is breathed out by God and recorded by His chosen inspired writers as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, we take God at His Word. (cf: 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21) How is Jesus' body and blood present in, with, and under the bread and wine? I don't know! But what I do know is – Jesus said it and Jesus is God. He created the heavens and earth and all things in six days. How? I don't know that either – but what I do know is – He's God. He created Adam out of the dust from the ground. I don't know how He did that either – but He's God – and God can do **whatever** He wants, **whenever** He wants, **however** He wants.

This is why we **fear the Lord**. As nothing more than poor, miserable beggars, you and I stand before our Holy and righteous God in awe, reverence, and respect. Onto all who believe and trust in Him, in His rich mercy and grace, He pours out His gifts of faith, life, and salvation.

Martin Luther says the First Commandment teaches that *“We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”* The **fear of God** begins with wisdom. You cannot **fear** something which you know nothing about. So, Jesus explains where this wisdom comes from. In last week's text, Jesus said:

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:44)

Today’s Gospel text is a continuation of that same conversation. Jesus doubles down so that His hearers understand, saying:

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe... This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” (John 6:63–65)

You are ***not*** spiritually self-sufficient. You cannot come to Jesus Christ your Lord or believe in Him by your own reason or strength. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Father draws you through the Word of Jesus. When you hear the preached Word, the Holy Spirit creates and sustains spiritual life within you – and gives you the ability to ***fear, love, and trust in God*** above all things. Jesus’ Words are the Words of eternal life. (cf: John 6:68) Our God is not an angry God, waiting on you to make a mistake so He can punish you. He wants to save you. As we heard in the Gradual:

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all.” (Psalm 34:19)

It was the Father’s will that Jesus, the Bread of Life, come down from heaven have His flesh torn and His blood spilled on the cross to pay the ransom for the sins of the world. And while Jesus arose from the dead and ascending back into heaven, He comes to you right here in the Divine Service, revealing Himself and feeding you in Word and Sacrament.

By faith, you cling to Jesus’ promises. His Word is eternal life. His body and His blood, given and shed for you, are heavenly food and drink that create and sustain faith within you and give you everlasting life and the resurrection of your body and the Last Day.

The ***fear of the LORD*** is the beginning of wisdom, and for those who ***fear the Lord*** have no lack. By the power of the Holy Spirit, walk as children of the light, discerning what is pleasing to the Lord:

“... giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

(Ephesians 5:20–21)

...and in ***fear of the Lord***.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.