

Fearless

I read the newspapers every day, and I watch the news on the telly. I read commentary on various Internet websites. And I get out of the house and talk to people. And what astonishes me most about the current scene in America is this: There's no fear of God. It's absent. This seems to be true in society at large and even within our churches. Why is this?

Six reasons immediately come to mind: (1) We're self-righteous. We think there's nothing wrong with us, in fact, we're actually *good* people, so there's no reason to have to fear God. In fact, He must love us! (2) We're idolaters. We never have to fear an idol, because an idol is of our own making. We wrongly suppose that India is a land of idols. Wrong. America is. Idolatry after all is a matter of the heart. Or, if we're not idolaters, then we're Deists. God doesn't know and/or doesn't care about us. No one need fear a Deist-type god. (3) We have no sense of sin. Sin to us is an abstract concept, if it's even that. Worse, we don't want sin to bother us. Sin is what Hitler did, or what school-shooters do, or it's owning slaves. Sin may be doing something really, really bad, which we've never done. So sin? Not us. We have no reason to fear God. Whether we're church-goers or not, I suspect that we don't even know what sin is. (4) We're ignorant of God. We don't know Him as He reveals Himself. Instead, we hold in mind a caricature of Him, one that doesn't provoke fear. And we want it that way. We deliberately refuse to study His self-revelation in Scripture because we don't want to know Him. That's because to know Him is to fear Him and to fear Him means we must change how we live. And that, we absolutely do not want to do. Many of us in America (intellectuals mostly) even pretend that God doesn't exist. So there's no reason (they thoughtlessly suppose) to have to fear One who probably doesn't exist. (5) If we feared God, we'd love Him. We don't love God, and we don't want to. If we loved God, we'd need to repent of sin and obey His commands, which we don't want to do. We love ourselves instead, and we want it to stay that way. So to avoid this whole matter of loving and obeying God, it's easier to be indifferent to Him, ignore His revelation, ignore His Word, ignore even the possibility of consequences. (6) Our theology is corrupt. We translate "fear" as awe or respect, so there's no need to tremble. We suppose that God is all love and only love. So there's no need to shudder. We suppose that God is sufficiently pleased with our church attendance to obviate any need to fear Him. We suppose that believing in Jesus automatically places us beyond any reason to tremble.

There's more. The absence of the fear of God is so prevalent that the Calvinists among us must be right. The fear of God is a gift. God gives the fear of Him that leads to repentance only to His elect. If He withholds that gift of fear, by default our controlling sin nature blocks out, in one way or another, the very awareness of His existence from our minds. And that leaves us condemned. The gift of the fear of God, in other words, saves us from the hardness of heart due to sin and sin's fully deserved condemnation. If the Arminians among us are right, however, then God does at some point in each life impress on the mind His existence and the need to fear Him, which we're free to suppress, and which most of us do to our eternal regret.

But it's worse. Not only is there no fear of God in our land, we actually *dare* God to punish us. We flaunt our sins before His face with total contempt for His holiness. How else can we explain the following examples? We hate Israel, His chosen people; we obviously hate the Bible, His love-letter to us because we so assiduously ignore it; we love to kill unborn babies whom God gifted to us; we love to take sensually-thrilling, mind-numbing drugs; we engage in all manner of *porneia* and commit adultery as if sexuality is just another form of entertainment; and we're not only indifferent to His Son, we mock Him every occasion we get. Christians too! We in the churches know that we're to be obedient to Jesus' teachings and commands and even sing songs of obedience, yet we refuse to do it. We refuse to do personal Gospel outreach, we refuse to look to see how to help others in need or to love our brothers in Christ. We don't even know the teachings of Jesus that we suppose we obey. We don't even care! We are utterly indifferent to God's discipline, to the thought of being held accountable for how we live. And we foolishly suppose that all we really need in America is the right government leaders and all will be right.

I suggest that much of Christianity in America is not biblical Christianity but a grotesquely modified form of it that's better understood as "civic religion." What is civic religion? In civic religion there's no fear of God because there's no God to fear. There's nothing to obey, no demands, no commitments. There's no one to hold us accountable. There's no personal sacrifice. We're allowed to be passive; in fact we're expected to be spectators only. In civic religion, God and America are fused together. Where the ugly parts of America are, God isn't there. Where the good and ideal parts of America are, there God is. America is to be worshipped, loved, and served. Freedom and prosperity are ours, for our self-gratification. Our

passion is our country and the blessings it endows. The main (and mandatory) ritual of civic religion is church attendance on Sundays. Yes, its core doctrine is the cross, and its main tenets to be lived are the Ten Commandments (or at least a few of them, such as don't steal or kill or commit adultery). And yes, there's the need to "believe" in Jesus (whatever that may mean to us). But in this civic religion, Jesus came to earth to gratify us. After all, God loves us and gives us life to gratify us. Civic religion is a tradition. It offers a sense of community and a set of values that are satisfying. The superlative advantage of civic religion is there's enough biblical content to make our souls comfortable, but no more than that is required. In civic religion, we're at liberty to be materialists, to live as we please, to exclude God and His will from our lives. And not have to fear God. Civic religion is deadly.

People who are demented, asleep, comatose, moribund or dead don't think. All others, especially my readers, should think deeply and clearly about this matter. Why? Because God is dangerous. We play games with God, we put Him to the test, we presume upon His grace and goodness *at our peril*. God expects us to fear Him. **"Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you"** (Psalm 90:11). **"Very great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events"** [at the sudden taking of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:1-11]. **"Let us serve God with great caution and fear, for our God is a consuming fire"** (Hebrews 12:28-29). **"Come out of her [Babylon], my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues"** (Revelation 18:4). We must be exceedingly circumspect about our religion. Complacency or smugness is not an option where God is concerned.

Here's the issue. Actually there are two parts to the issue. (i) A cosmic principle is at work. **"Those who honor Me I will honor, but those who despise Me will be cursed"** (1 Samuel 2:30c). As Creator, as giver and sustainer of life ("In Him we live, move and have our being," Acts 17:28), and as Redeemer and Lover, we owe God a massive amount of honor. We honor Him by obeying Him, by living according to His revealed wisdom, by serving Him as He has revealed we're to do that, by becoming as He is. Anything else is to despise God. There exists no neutral or in-between position. We should live every day in fear of failing to do as He's demanded. Yes, to empower us, He's given us His Spirit (if we're in personal relationship with the Son), but we can easily quench or grieve the Spirit so we're no better at living as we ought than are atheists.

And this, (ii) Can I by myself, on my own, will to be as I want to be or live as I want to live? If so, I'm a god. Only gods are autonomous; only gods have absolute freedom. If I can will to be whatever kind of person I desire to be or live however I please, without regard to God's good and perfect will, I'm an anti-Christ. I'm an atheist. I'm a replacement for God in the spirit of Satan. I love myself to the absolute exclusion of God (words to the contrary notwithstanding). We in America are obsessed with freedom. We've taken those political freedoms to mean that we're free *in an absolute sense* to be, like gods, at liberty to exercise our wills independent of revealed standards. No! Only God has the absolute freedom to will, for Himself and all His creatures, how to live and how to be. Creatures have been given only sufficient will to choose to submit to God, or not. And if not, to suffer dire consequences. The fear of God will keep us humble and dependent on God and His wisdom and power for life in His presence. Can we grasp this truth?

But now someone will challenge me. "Hey, where is the Gospel in all this? Where is the love of God? What you're teaching borders on legalism." No it doesn't. We must be careful that our understanding of the Gospel does not come from our civic religion, or from deeply-ingrained theological traditions of well-intentioned but human invention. So what is the Gospel? The Gospel is Jesus. *Everything* Jesus, His Person, His teachings and commands, His promises and His work. Jesus saves us not only from the penalty of sin but also by His indwelling Spirit from the power of sin in every area of our life. He gives us His righteousness and He shares with us His own eternal, powerful life. And He takes us to heaven to enjoy God's Person, His love and blessing. But the Gospel must have from us a response. Our response must be to love Jesus. To love Him means to trust Him, obey Him and serve Him. It means to want to be like Him, a loving, selfless, righteous, serving person. It means we want Him to be exalted by our own life modeled on His. It also means knowing we're accountable for what God has invested in us. None of this is legalism. It's all relationship, it's being in intimate fellowship with the living God. **"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"** (Palm 111:10). We don't know any of this life-changing truth if we don't first tremble at what will happen to us if we refuse the Gospel offer, or if we reject all that's demanded of us by the Gospel. Thus, we're commanded, for example, to put away all sin and worldliness and be perfect in holiness. Why? Because of a fear of God (2 Corinthians 7:1). With fear and trembling we're to express our salvation (Philippians 2:12) with good works, for example, and with righteousness. Readers should reflect deeply on Matthew 7:23 before crying "legalism." Legalism is an attitude. Dear reader, to fear God is to know Him and to know Him is to love Him. That's what life is for.