

THE FEAR OF JUDGMENT MAKES US COWARDS

The fear of judgment is answered by the power of Christ's atonement

By Jay Wegter

I. Sin has made us cowards.

- A. It was William Shakespeare who said, "Conscience doth make cowards of us all" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.56). Unsaved men are in bondage and slavery to the **fear of death** (Heb. 2:14-15; Job 18:14). The fear involved is a dreaded fear of exposure and punishment (1 John 4:18; Heb. 9:27; 1 Cor. 15:56; Job 18:14). The fear beneath all fears is one of ultimate judgment. When sin entered the human race, the fear of condemnation was its instantaneous companion (Gen 3:10).
1. Immediately after sinning, Adam and Eve utilized **strategies** to ward off the threat of judgment: Adam attempted to **cover** his shame. He was **afraid**. He tried to **hide** from his Creator and Judge. He engaged in **blame** in order to defer judgment away from himself (Gen. 3:7-13). What Adam did when God questioned him has been the behavior of the human race ever since.
 2. According to Scripture, the guilt man feels as a sinner is not simply the irritations of conscience as psychology would suggest, it is actual legal guilt before God (Rom. 3:23; 2:5).
 3. The human condition of guilt before God is characterized by fear of punishment. This fear manifests itself in judgment-avoidance strategies such as **blame, shame, hiding, anxiety, flight, appeasement, and defiance** (Jn 8:48).
- B. By nature, we are like Adam—we do not deal courageously with our sin. The fear of punishment makes cowards of us all. The roots of cowardice penetrate deep in our lives *because* not only are we condemned in our acts of sin, but also in our *whole nature and being* (Jer 17:1, 9; Rom 3:9-18).
- C. **Only a perfect atonement can end our fear of judgment.** The design of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice was to deliver us from the **bondage of fear**, and to replace the fear with a **spirit of adoption** (Rom 8:15ff). Friendship with God (reconciliation) marks the end of life under fear of condemnation (Heb 2:14, 15). (By "propitiatory" we mean that the sacrifice of Christ quenched God's wrath for all who would ever believe.)
- D. Only when fear is cast out can we be **perfected in love** (1 John 4:18). Our relationship with God begins when our guilt is cleared by God Almighty (Rom 4:7-8).

II. The power of sin is the law (1 Cor 15:56).

- A. Central to the human dilemma is the fact that sin is charged to our account by means of God's Law (Rom. 5:13). When we transgress the Law of God, iniquity is imputed to us.

The Law declares death's legal power over us as the just penalty for sin (Ez. 18:4; 1 Cor. 15:56).

- B.** The Law holds the whole human race in custody as capital offenders awaiting judgment (Gal. 3:22; Rom 11:32).
- C.** Sinners universally resist God's verdict concerning their sin. Apart from God's Spirit, men are not willing to condemn themselves, and they refuse to pronounce themselves deserving of eternal damnation. Repentance does not take place until the sinner says the same thing about his sin as God says about it.
- D.** Only by the Spirit's convicting work will men be brought to see their *ill desert* before God (Jn 16:8-11). The Spirit 'sets up court' in the conscience of a man in order to establish the verdict called for by God's Law. The cross is a great stumbling block to the proud intellect of man because the cross supports the verdict of God's Law: "Sin deserves death and eternal separation from God." One divine said it this way, "The cross is a monument to the human race that man deserves to die" (Gardiner Spring).
- E.** The legal condemnation of God's Law hangs over a person like a huge sword ready to drop, pierce, and cleave. In our glorious gospel, the Son of God placed Himself between us and the "sword" of God's wrath. In the substitutionary death of Christ for believing sinners, God's wrath falls upon the Son of God in His death by crucifixion (Is 53:6).

III. The O.T. Law was the ministry of condemnation and death (2 Cor 3:7-9).

- A.** The Levitical law served the purpose of raising the consciousness of personal sin to a height previously unknown in human history. The entire Judaic system continually imbued the worshipper with the awareness of his sin (Heb 9:9, 10; 10:1-3).
- B.** Sinful human nature staggered under the Law's crushing demands. Instead of being able to control a person morally, the Law strangles, exasperates, and suffocates the sinner (Acts 15:10). The Law's demands are absolute, but the Law grants no power or inclination to the sinner that enables obedience (Gal 2:15-16; Rom 3:19-20).
- C.** The Law came with a curse upon those who could not fulfill it (Gal. 3:10-13; James 2:10). It was meant to be the great revealer of man's sinful condition (Rom. 3:20). Therefore, the Law is NOT a 'ladder' to climb to heaven; it is a 'mirror' to show us our sin and our desperate need of Christ and His provision for sinners (Rom 3:19-20).

Is it any wonder that the Apostle Paul describes the Law in the book of Galatians with a series of negative metaphors? In that epistle, the Law is pictured as a jailer, a condemner, and an executioner. This is the 'ministry of condemnation', and it is intended to urge the sinner to flee to Christ, the "City of Refuge." Thus, the Law serves as the great avenger of God's righteousness and holiness.

The Law demands justice against those who have dishonored God by trampling upon His commandments. The one positive metaphor for the Law in Galatians is the word, "tutor." The Law has become our "tutor" to lead to Christ. Therefore, the Law has a tutorial function with only one lesson to teach the lost sinner: *by the works of the Law no*

flesh will be justified in God's sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin (Rom 3:20).

IV. The Law is not of faith; for the law says 'do this and live' (Gal 3:12).

- A. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), the *spirit of the Law* was driven home by Jesus' preaching. Love for God and neighbor are not just externals, *the demands of the law for perfect love to God and neighbor extend to what a man thinks, loves, speaks and longingly looks at!*
- B. Luther noted that the Sermon on the Mount exasperates the sinner and is therefore preparatory for belief in the gospel. Not only, does the Law *exasperate*, it may also *exacerbate* the sinner's problem (Rom. 5:20). (Def. of *exacerbate* – increase severity of or bitterness of. Drive 55! It made people want to drive 65+ mph.) Mankind has no idea of the strength of the 'river' of his depravity. Not until he puts his feet on the bottom and tries to walk upstream against the current does he have any idea of his bondage to sin. Note: The Sermon on the Mount is not only preparatory for salvation; it also describes the life of the obedient believer.
- C. The sinner must learn that the law way is *closed* as a way of obtaining right standing with God (Rom. 3:20; 10:1-4; 4:4-16). The present evangelical function of the Law is that of a tutor to lead a person to Christ as the only Way of right standing (Gal. 3:24, 25).
- D. Though the Law is holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12); the Law only brings death, wrath and condemnation *because* of the weakness of human flesh (Rom. 8:3-8).

V. The unbeliever's response to God's demand for justice and righteousness is *enmity and fear* (Rom 5:10; Eph 2:15, 16).

- A. Unrepentant man has no sentiment for God's glory. The natural man is an enemy of the purpose of God (2 Cor 10:5; Rom 1:18-23); and an enemy of the knowledge of God (Rom. 5:10; Phil. 3:18-19).
- B. The N.T. Greek word for enemy (*echthros*), is closely related to the Greek word for enmity, (*echthra*). The mind set on the flesh is *hostile toward God* (Rom. 8:7).
- C. The condemned soul is enslaved to sin and alienated from God and he or she cannot love God (Titus 3:3 ff). The good news of the gospel is that the solution to man's problem is entirely from the outside of man. Man is not even part of the solution! God has acted *unilaterally* and *alone* to solve man's dilemma.
- D. Salvation by grace through faith removes our enmity toward God. His holiness is now beautiful to us. One believing "look" at Christ strikes enmity from the heart forever (John 3:14-18). The cross not only makes us acceptable to God, it also makes God's holiness desirable to us (Ps 27:4). *Discussion: Why is it true that a person can't love God until he knows for sure he has been forgiven?*

VI. The natural man's condition is akin to being stuck in a vice.

- A. People attempt to meet their needs by sinning; then their consciences justly accuse them for doing so. With a defiled conscience comes guilt, and fear of punishment (Prov 13:14).
- B. The obligation to obey God remains in full force; but the inclination to obey God was decimated by the fall of Adam. This fallen condition places man in a crushing vice so to speak. Desires, needs and wants dictate one direction (the mind is set on the flesh Rom 8:6-8); at the same time, the Law of God demands that a man be righteous or face death and separation from God (Rom 6:23).
- C. What the law says he should be and what his desires dictate form the two arms of the vice clamped upon him. As he seeks to solve his needs and problems by sin, the arms of the vice squeeze harder, producing more guilt, and fear of punishment. Wrath is stored up for the day of wrath (Rom 2:5).
 - 1. Is it any wonder that sin makes cowards of us all (Heb. 2:14-15; 1 Jn 4:18)? Like Adam, we do not deal with our sin courageously. The principle of guilt before God's Law seeks to dominate our lives through fear of punishment.
 - 2. We tend to be cowed, defiant, self-justifying, and self-protective. In our flesh, we will run anywhere but to the atonement God has provided in His Son. We desperately need Christ's work in order to be free of guilt's captivity (Heb 7:25; 9:14).
 - 3. Like Adam, all our fleshly strategies employed to avoid judgment utterly fail. Whether it is denial, appeasement, rationalizing or defiance, the efforts we make to escape the painful truth about ourselves fall short of the heroism God calls us to practice (Prov 28:13).

VII. The flesh has strategies it employs in order to avoid judgment.

As you begin to study this section, keep in mind that our human nature will do practically anything to escape exposure to judgment. Jesus stresses this truth in John 3:19-21 where He indicates that, "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed." Exposure to judgment is what we fight against. The reader is encouraged to read the 'strategies to avoid judgment' listed below in a soul-searching way. Knowing how we attempt to deflect judgment will be of assistance as we turn away from these fleshly strategies and trust Christ and the gospel more fully.

- A. Adam's flight from God in Eden set the pattern for the entire human race: "*I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; so I hid myself*" (Gen 3:10). The effort to ward off judgment is expressed in the form of strategies that fall under three following heads:
- B. The **first strategy** involves the effort to escape condemnation by flight. This constitutes an attempt to "turn off" the conscience by a denial of judgment. We can recall the

attempts of a number of biblical characters who used this method, or fleshly strategy: Pilate in Matthew 27:24; Nabal in 1 Samuel 25:36-38; or Felix in Acts 24:25.

- C.** A **second strategy** that is used to ward off the threat of judgment is open resistance. This involves an attempt to take on the judgment “head on” with a defense or, even with defiance or hostility. Biblical figures who employed open resistance or were defiant in the face of judgment were: Pharaoh in Exodus 5:2; Job in Job 23:1-7; Zedekiah in Jeremiah 36:23-25; the Jewish refugees under Jeremiah in Jeremiah 44:15-18; Peter’s cursing in his thrice denial of Jesus in Matthew 26:69-75.
- D.** A **third strategy** used to ward off judgment is appeasement. Of the three, this strategy is dealt with in the greatest detail in Scripture. Saul of Tarsus sought to win God’s favor by Law keeping. Saul sought to obligate God and win His friendship by successfully adhering to the law (Phil 3:4-6; Gal 1:14).

The appeasement strategy recognizes the superior force of the judgment that is faced. It is aware of personal vulnerability. *“This strategy attempts to negotiate for peace with the hostile powers of condemnation, hoping for the best”* (Zahl, *Who Will Deliver Us?* p. 22). Appeasement ultimately fails to deliver from the threat of judgment.

Apart from the transforming grace of God, everyone lives by one or more of the judgment evasion strategies listed above. And, it doesn’t take much imagination to see how these fleshly strategies take a toll upon our most intimate relationships. Our strategies of *denial*, *defiance*, or *appeasement* will tend to short circuit the intimacy and trust called for in close relationships among true believers. This is why in our Christian marriages we so desperately need the gospel applied daily.

VIII. Nothing can bring rest to the conscience of man but that justice which satisfies God Himself (2 Cor 5:21).

- A.** Every strategy employed by man to elude judgment will ultimately fail. Every false hiding place will someday be revealed as a “refuge of lies,” (Is. 28:17). Because men do not know God, they take no account now of the fact that they daily “bribe” their conscience (Jn 15:21; 16:3).
- B.** The fact that man is made in the moral image of God means that man’s conscience can never be eradicated. All efforts to do so will only produce greater eternal anguish. The activities of the conscience are a constant reminder of the great judgment to come (Rom 2:1-10, 16).
- C.** Though men experience temporary “success” in quieting their consciences, a day is coming when the conscience will take its eternal revenge. On that day, the conscience will accept no bribes, it will demand strict justice. It will agree with God’s law verdict that man’s sin deserves eternal wrath. Then the verdict of conscience and the verdict of God’s justice will ignite in a conflagration of wrath that will never cease. The conscience will rise to its full stature as the moral image of God and it will take its eternal revenge (Rom 2:5-9; 16). This is why repentance is crucial. We must not remain in the strategies which we employ to defend against judgment. We must seek a genuine deep conviction

of our sin. “Come to the light” so that our sinful deeds may be exposed and forgiven by the blood of Christ.

D. Against this dark fact of God’s coming comprehensive judgment, the atonement of Jesus Christ has a significance and wealth of grace beyond description. In the atonement, the believing sinner beholds Christ, the suffering God-man, bleeding and dying in his place. This is NOT to arouse sympathy—this is the satisfaction of objective justice on behalf of the believing sinner. The law of God and the conscience of man will accept nothing less than divine justice (Rom 3:24-26).

E. When the sinner casts a believing “look” at Christ, for the first time in his life his conscience is at peace and rest. He sees that justice has been served concerning his sin. With his sin forgiven, his formerly troubled conscience becomes like the placid surface of a lake—now he begins the blessed work of reflecting the character of his Creator, and beholding God’s glory (2 Cor 3:17-18).

1. There is no greater blessing than to have the court of heaven and the court of conscience to be in full agreement concerning the sinner’s acquittal—all because of the sacrifice of Christ. The Christian must labor to have the verdict of heaven (in his justification) as the “loudest voice” in his conscience (Heb 4:1, 11, 16). We must continually educate our consciences by the gospel. We must learn the habit of taking Christ for our righteousness; for right-standing before God is only found in Jesus Christ.
2. God be praised that in justification, the Lord of glory writes His verdict of “righteous” upon the conscience of the sinner who casts himself upon Christ (Acts 24:15-16).
3. Only by a steady diet of the gospel and by ongoing repentance of sin will we overcome the tyranny of fear and no longer find liberty in Christ to be elusive (Gal 5:1). We need to take Christ as our eligibility for God’s love and favor. Only then will we consent to be loved by Him and find delight in His perfect acceptance of us in Christ (Rom 5:1-2, 5ff.).

CONCLUSION:

Hopefully we are gaining insight into the reality that the dynamics of grace constitute so much more than a series of principles to improve our Christian walk. Grace dynamics are God’s appointed means to grow in our knowledge of the Lord. As we live upon Christ and the gospel we are having communion with the Lord and we are learning more of who God is toward us in Christ.

We have seen in this lesson that in order to deal decisively with our fear of judgment, we must know what God has done in Christ to end that fear. Thus, the only way we will come out of hiding and desist from our judgment-evading strategies, is to begin living by the gospel as our source of safety and security. In the next lesson we will explore why the grace of God in the gospel is designed to make us heroic in dealing with personal sin.