

Fear God: Searching for a Definition

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 19, #48 December 5, 2004GG

And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding. (Job 28:28)

When trying to understand a difficult concept, the first—and best—task is to ensure that we are working with a correct and clear definition of the idea. It is not sufficient to define the word. Sometimes words can take on so many meanings from their context. The wise task is to define the idea itself. What do we mean when we talk about fearing God?

The first point we need to confront is the idea that fearing God is taught in Scripture, and is consistently presented as a good thing; in fact a thing to be greatly desired. If we simply dismiss the idea of fearing God as inconsistent with loving God—and we'd rather love Him than fear Him—we will never come to terms with the noble Biblical idea of fearing God. I "fear" that many believers never get beyond this hurdle. They simply adopt an unclear idea of the fear of God and ignore it because they do not really understand the idea at all. If Scripture teaches me that fearing God is a good thing, I should accept that commandment and seek to learn what Scripture means by the idea. God does not issue contradictory commandments, so any idea that loving God and fearing Him are in conflict puts us on notice that we have failed to understand one or both of these ideas.

I have often heard people quote our study verse when trying to come to terms with the idea of fearing God. The verse presents two sets of parallel ideas. First let's single them out.

1. *The fear of the Lord is wisdom.*
2. *To depart from evil is understanding.*

Wisdom as set forth in Scripture may be about as challenging an idea as fearing God, so the passage, viewed as superficially as we typically consider it, is not as helpful as we would like. Perhaps the fact that we often quote this verse as leading us to understand the idea of the fear of God indicates that we know intuitively, even if we don't grasp clearly, that the verse reveals something worth our thought.

English poetry is characterized by various patterns of syllable counts in each line (Whether we remember the technical meaning or not, who among us does not remember the frequent literature class term "iambic pentameter"? English poetry is also characterized by a pattern of rhyming sounds in the last words in each line. Hebrew poetry, at least the psalms that were compiled for musical accompaniment, may well have a numeric pattern of syllables per line. However, in Hebrew poetry the rhyming scheme does not appear in ending sounds, but in ideas. This is quite significant when we start interpreting the poetic books of the Old Testament. Hebrew poetry is characterized by rhyming ideas. Given this basic trait of Hebrew poetry, let's create the grammatical equivalent of mathematical formulae and see how many true equivalent relationships we can discover. Perhaps this approach will help us gain a better insight into our objective.

1. First "equation;" fearing God equals wisdom.
2. Second "equation;" departing from evil equals understanding. Based on the idea of rhyming ideas, we can add two additional equations to our list.
3. Third "equation;" this one is obvious, but necessary to establish our objective. Wisdom equals understanding.

4. Fourth “equation;” fearing God equals departing from evil.

A major component of fearing God surfaces in the fourth “equation.” Grammatically, equations 1 and 2 are obvious. The third is logically obvious. The fourth opens a fresh concept for us to consider in relationship to the fear of God. Departing from evil is conduct that reflects one’s fear of God. Not departing from evil conversely indicates that we do not fear God. When we assess our personal conduct in light of Scripture and a sensitive moral conscience, we come to a productive and interesting conclusion. We fear God to some extent, but not as fully as we should. The degree to which we perpetuate sin in our lives, regardless of the nature of the sin, reflects a direct corollary to our fear of God. To the extent that we do not root sin out of our life we do not fear God as Scripture commands.

To counteract our rather typical, faulty identifying the fear of God with a sense of dread, this simple verse from the oldest book of the Bible redirects our motives. Fearing God—and its logical conduct, departing from evil—is motivated by wisdom and understanding, not by morbid fear of consequences or punishment. There is no doubt that we should try to get away from the notion that the Biblical concept of fearing God equates with dread of punishment or evil consequences. In the New Testament Paul presents the correct motive for godly conduct. “For the love of Christ constraineth us” (2Co 5:14a). The only effective constraint against sin in the believer’s life is an awareness of the price that God’s love paid for our sins. The remainder of this verse and its context takes us directly to that point. He died for us because the consequence of our sins left us in a relational state of being dead to God. He had to stoop to our legal state in order to reconcile us to the legal state of salvation and peace with God. Knowing that our sins caused His suffering and death serves as a far more effective deterrent to sin than dread of punishment.

We seldom make a direct link between the fear of God and our conduct toward sin, at least from the perspective that this verse establishes. Intuitively we sense that we manifest our fear of God by our conduct, but we still struggle with how it all comes together so as to avoid fear as dread of consequences, as well as integrating the fear of God and the love of God in our attitude. Interestingly in the Second Corinthians passage, Paul completes the bridge by indicating that God’s love for us, manifested in Jesus’ suffering and death, constrains our personal conduct.

Based on this refreshing concept of the fear of God, I offer each of us, myself included, something of a challenge. If a person gauged our fear of God by our personal conduct, especially including our “besetting sins,” those issues or behavior patterns in our life that we jealously protect and defend, what conclusions would they draw regarding our fear of God? Would they believe that we truly fear God? Or would they conclude that God is not particularly significant in our moral and ethical choices? For that matter, we could ask the same questions, making our love for God the condition of the question rather than our fear of God.

Interestingly, we readily sing the hymn *I Want to Love Him More* with conviction. Would we sing a new version of the same hymn as readily if the words were “I Want to Fear Him More”? You see, this verse, enlightened by Paul’s thoughts from 2Co 5:14, not only eliminates the tension between loving God and fearing Him. It actually puts both attitudes toward God on the same footing.

I suggest that each of us has a significant—a life-changing—assignment ahead of us. What changes in our personal habits, especially in the area of our “besetting sins,” must we make to communicate both our love and fear of God to ourselves, as well as to the people around us who regularly witness our personal conduct?

Often these Biblical themes prompt me to ask a double-pronged question. One prong addresses the moral question of our conduct. The other prong addresses the “ethical” dimension of our conduct. Let me illustrate. If you want to study the ethical element of your Christianity, study the Sermon on the Mount. Most, if not all, of the people who will likely read this chapter live with a moral compass that

would forbid them from remotely considering murder. You might well become angry with someone who fails to live up to your demands or expectations, but you wouldn't murder them. However, I suggest that you look back over the last several episodes in your life that involved your interaction with someone who didn't live up to your expectations. It might be the mechanic who failed to repair your car or a home appliance. It might be the UPS driver who left a package at your door in the middle of a heavy rainstorm. It might be a friend or family member who said something that rubbed you the wrong way. How did you react to them? If you reacted with angry, abrasive words, you broke the ethical rule that Jesus established in the Sermon on the Mount. Your angry words grew out of the same anger that—in some other people might evoke murder. In Jesus' words you committed murder in your heart. May we learn to apply Jesus' words to our emotions and our tongues.