

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification and, more particularly, the means of grace. We are in the midst of discussing prayer and in our last session we started looking at what Charles Hodge calls the requisites of acceptable prayer. We only had time to discuss the first requisite last week, which is that our prayers must be sincere. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: By moving on to the second requisite that Hodge mentions, which is reverence for God.¹

Marc Roby: Which, of course, means to have proper honor and respect for God.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is the basic meaning. And there is no one for whom we should have greater respect, or to whom we owe greater honor than God. In introducing the Ten Commandments to his people, we read in Exodus 20:2 that God declared, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."² This statement is the beginning of a covenant document, describing a covenant that God unilaterally imposed on his people. It has been pointed out that this covenant follows the form of ancient treaties from the near east³, wherein a great king made a treaty, or covenant, with lesser kings, called vassals.

Marc Roby: And there is no king greater than God, who is the Creator and Lord of all earthly kings.

Dr. Spencer: And so he has the authority to unilaterally impose such a covenant. These ancient covenant documents typically started with two elements: first, the great king announcing his name and then, second, his giving a historical prologue, which is a recitation of the blessings this king has already given to the vassal kings⁴. And Exodus 20:2 contains these two elements. First, God announces who he is, "I am the LORD your God." And secondly, he announces what he has done for his people. He has brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

And the same things apply to all true Christians – the Lord our God has brought *us* out of slavery too. Out of our slavery to sin. He has redeemed us and called us from darkness to light, from eternal condemnation to eternal life.

Marc Roby: Praise God! The Bible certainly tells us that. We read in Luke 1:68 that John the Baptist's father proclaimed, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people."

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. III, pg. 702

² All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

³ Called Hittite Suzerainty treaties (a Suzerain is a great king). This one is called the Sinaitic covenant. See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2010, pp.107 & 147

⁴ Ibid, pg. 147

Dr. Spencer: And we can also cite 1 Peter 2:9, where we are told, “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” There are many different ways of putting it, but there is no doubt that we owe everything to God.

Marc Roby: To begin with, we owe him life itself. We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him. We read in Acts 17:28 that Paul told the people in Athens, “we live and move and have our being” in God.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's true. And we are also told in James 1:17 that “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” We must give God thanks for absolutely every good thing that we enjoy in this life. And so, it is perfectly fitting and proper for us to approach him with great reverence.

But there is more to it than just respect and honor. Reverence is also closely associated with fear. In fact, the third definition listed for fear in Webster's dictionary is, “profound reverence and awe especially toward God”⁵. And even the primary definition of fear given by Webster's is entirely appropriate. It is, “an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger”. And there is always danger when sinful creatures are confronted with the perfectly just and holy God against whom they have sinned.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of the famous line from C.S. Lewis' allegorical story *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. When Susan finds out that Aslan, who represents Christ in the story, isn't a man, but a lion, she asks Beaver, “Is he – quite safe?” And Beaver responds, “Safe? ... Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.”⁶

Dr. Spencer: That is a great line, and perfectly appropriate. Jesus Christ is *not* safe, but he *is* good. And because of Christ and his work, his people do not need to fear punishment. In 1 John 4:18 we are told, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” Interpreters don't all agree about this verse, but there are some things we can say for certain. First, it explicitly says it is speaking about the fear that has to do with punishment.

Marc Roby: In other words, the dreaded knowledge that you have done something wrong, something that deserves punishment, and are going to be called to account for it.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And we are all going to be called to account. We are told in 2 Corinthians 5:10 that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” Even unbelievers know, deep down in their hearts, that a day of reckoning is coming. They try to suppress that knowledge, and some do it quite well, but they do still know.

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fear> (accessed on 3/20/21)

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia, Book Two, The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Illustrated by Pauline Baynes, Harper Trophy, 2000, pg. 80

Marc Roby: Yes, some people also suppress the truth by changing the standard. They redefine sin so that, according to their standard, they haven't sinned in any terrible way.

Dr. Spencer: That is a common approach. But there are two fatal problems with that approach. First, almost everyone will admit that he or she has sinned even according to their own standard. Very few people will seriously try to maintain that they have led a sinless life. And James tells us in James 2:10 that "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." So, according to God's perfect standard, even one little sin would be one too many. You are still guilty of sin against the infinite God of the universe, which is worthy of infinite punishment.

Marc Roby: And the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 3:20 that "no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law".

Dr. Spencer: And that is the point I'm trying to make. If we are honest with ourselves, we all know that we don't really want to stand before the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfectly just Lord of the universe and ask to be judged on our merits.

The second fatal error with this attempt to evade the problem is that we aren't God. We don't have the right to define what is sin and what isn't sin. It is transparently silly to think that we do. What authority or power do we have that gave us the right or ability to do so?

Marc Roby: Well, the obvious answer for any mere creature is that they have no such authority or power.

Dr. Spencer: And therefore, all such attempts to evade the issue are doomed to fail. We will all stand before God someday. And he will judge us according to the only standard that matters, which is his perfect standard. And he will judge us according to his perfect knowledge of everything we have ever done, said or thought.

Marc Roby: And that should result in fear for anyone who thinks about it very much.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it should bring fear. Fear of just punishment, which is the fear John is speaking of in 1 John 4:18.

Marc Roby: What else can we say for certain about this verse?

Dr. Spencer: Well, he says that "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear", so we can say that there is a love which is able to drive this fear from us. This perfect love comes from God and is supremely expressed in his sending his eternal Son to be incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, born of a virgin, and sent for the express purpose of living a sinless life to perfectly fulfill God's law and then willingly taking our sins upon himself, bearing the wrath of God for us, and dying to pay for our sins.

Marc Roby: That love is amazing. And beyond understanding. It is what Jesus was speaking of when he said, in John 3:16, that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Dr. Spencer: This love is amazing. And John also speaks of this love elsewhere in this letter and those verses will help us to understand this present verse. In 1 John 4:12 he wrote that “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” The Greek verb translated here as “made complete” is τελειόω (teleioō), which means to complete, or bring to its goal, or bring to full measure, or to make perfect.⁷ This verb is related to the adjective used in the verse we have been discussing, 1 John 4:18. When that verse speaks of the “perfect love” that casts out fear, the Greek adjective translated as perfect is τέλειος (teleios), which means complete, or perfect. These words are cognates, they have the same basic root.

Marc Roby: It's important to see the condition upon which John says, in Verse 12, that God's love will be made complete in us. He says that “if we love one another”, then God's love is made complete in us. And when we look at the whole letter, it is clear that he is speaking about a practical, self-sacrificing love. Not some feeling or attitude. In Chapter 3, Verses 16-17 John wrote, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”

Dr. Spencer: That is a critically important point. The whole letter of 1 John is filled with tests to give ourselves to see whether or not our faith is genuine. But we are now ready to wrap up this discussion of perfect love and fear and see how it relates to our reverence for God.

Marc Roby: Yes, please do.

Dr. Spencer: Well, let me read 1 John 4:16-18. The apostle writes that “we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

I hope our listeners will look at those verses and meditate on them because they tell us several very important things. First, John says that we rely on the love that God has for us. It isn't our love for God that is primary, it is *his* love for us. Our love is *never* perfect in this life. Like everything else we do, our love is tainted by sin. But God's love *is* perfect and we can rely on that.

Marc Roby: And we could add that it is a great comfort to rely on God rather than ourselves. We are so prone to wander in our affections and obedience and so prone to emotional turmoil. If we depended on ourselves, it would be a shaky foundation to say the least.

Dr. Spencer: It would, in fact, be a fatally-flawed foundation guaranteed to crumble. But moving on, the second point John makes in these verses is that if we *live* in love, we live in God and he in us. Now, that is an amazing and profound statement. We must ask what it means to live in

⁷ See W. Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd Ed., Revised and augmented by F.W. Gingrich and F. Danker, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, pp 809-810

love. And the answer is that it means to actually put our love in practice as you noted earlier. It is sacrificing ourselves for the benefit of others, following the example of Christ.

Marc Roby: Which is an unattainable goal for us as sinners. We will never follow his example perfectly in this life.

Dr. Spencer: No, we won't but John says that to the extent we do follow Christ's example, God's love is made complete in us and we will have confidence on the day of judgment. In other words, we will have no cause for fear because we know we are loved by Christ and that he has saved us. In other words, to the extent a Christian enjoys assurance of salvation, he is also free from the fear of punishment. If our assurance were perfect, then our reverence for God would be pure reverence – meaning respect and honor, not tinged with fear. But, I would argue that even if we live a holy life and have great assurance of our salvation, the fear of the Lord in the sense of punishment still has a role to play in our life.

Marc Roby: I'd like to hear that argument.

Dr. Spencer: Well, let me begin by noting what happened right after Moses gave the people the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are given in Exodus 20:2-17, and then, in Verses 18-20 we are told, "When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.'" Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

Marc Roby: Verse 20 there is very interesting. Moses tells the people to *not* be afraid, and then he tells them that "the fear of God" will keep them from sinning.

Dr. Spencer: And that is the role that I am saying this fear of punishment should play in the life of a Christian even if that Christian is living a perfectly holy life and has absolute assurance of his salvation. Let me give an illustration that I hope will make the point clear.

Marc Roby: Yes, please do.

Dr. Spencer: Suppose a father takes his young child to see the Grand Canyon. They walk along the path that is fairly close to the rim and the child becomes afraid. But the father takes the child's hand and says, "Don't be afraid. You are perfectly safe with me." Now, he isn't telling the child that he shouldn't be afraid of falling over the edge, in fact, the father would *want* the child to be afraid of falling over the edge if he were running around free. That fear is healthy and would, hopefully, keep the child from being too daring and getting too close, where there is, in fact, a danger of slipping and falling. But, nevertheless, there is no reason for the child to fear as long as he stays on the path holding his father's hand.

It is much the same way with a Christian. So long as we stay on the narrow path set out for us by God, we have no reason to fear punishment. But we do all sin and stray from the path. And it is good for us to fear displeasing God and incurring punishment and it is even good to fear ever

straying completely from the path and thereby proving ourselves not to be his children. That fear will help to keep us from sinning.

Marc Roby: Yes, I see your point, although I think we should make it clear that for a true Christian, God's "punishment" is discipline, not wrath. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:32 that "When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world."

Dr. Spencer: That's a good point. God's objective is different in disciplining a child than it is in punishing an enemy, although the method may at times be the same in this life. John Murray says something similar in his wonderful book *Principles of Conduct*. In his final chapter, which is called *The Fear of God*, he writes, "The saint of God is not free from sin. He knows that sin is displeasing to God and he is keenly sensitive to the demands and judgments of his holiness. It is within this frame of thought and of feeling that we shall have to interpret those New Testament injunctions which never cease to have relevance to the believer during his sojourn here:"⁸ And Murray goes on to cite Philippians 2:12-13, which say, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Murray also cites 1 Peter 1:17, which says, "Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear."

Marc Roby: As usual, Murray hits the nail on the head. And I like your illustration. Fear is indeed a good motivator to keep us from doing things that are harmful, to keep us on the narrow path that leads to heaven.

Dr. Spencer: And so, to wrap up Hodge's second requisite for acceptable prayer, we must come to God with reverence. If we are born again and walking in obedience, that will, first and foremost, be honor and respect for God, but it will never be completely devoid of the dreadful fear of the punishment that comes to the ungodly because we are never completely devoid of sin in this life. We must, therefore, "be all the more eager to make [our] calling and election sure" as Peter admonishes us in 2 Peter 1:10.

Marc Roby: But praise God that Jesus Christ took the wrath that his people deserved. We will never experience God's wrath. We don't have time today to start looking at another of Hodge's requisites for acceptable prayer, so this is a good place to end. But first, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And we will do our best to answer.

⁸ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957, pp 235-236