



1 Peter 1:17-21  
Exiles – 1 Peter  
“Fighting Fear With Fear”

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October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Last week we began a 6-week sermon series that helps to lay some ground work for our church’s new vision for what it means to be a church here on the Eastside. The series is all based on different passages from the New Testament book of 1 Peter, with the series title and general themes each Sunday coming from a book we’re all reading called, “Evangelism as Exiles: Life on Mission as Strangers in Our Own Land.”

So, those of us who are pastors often have a conundrum...a tension...that we find ourselves in. We’re not the only ones who face this in life – we all do in different facets or seasons of life. But I do think it’s a little more acute and long-lasting for pastors because it’s not a fleeting conundrum. It’s continual. I would also say that this tension is spread out to a certain degree among other church leaders and decisions makers: staff and Elders, primarily. But, for as long as a guy or gal pastors a church, starting from day one until his or her retirement, this tension exists. So, we’re talking 35-40 years of this. Here’s what it is: **There is a tension for pastors (and other church leaders) that frequently exists between pleasing God and pleasing the congregation.** And when you factor in that my ability to put food on the table and pay our mortgage, etc., because of your giving, it raises that tension some.

Now, the tension doesn’t *always* exist. Sometimes the difficult decision that God is asking a pastor and the church leaders to make is something that the congregation says, “Hey, we know this is hard, and this quite frankly is not what we would do if we were here only for ourselves as consumers...but, out of a love for our neighbors, the Lord, the gospel...we want to make this sacrifice and do this thing that you – pastor/church leaders – are asking us to do. We believe it is also from God, and though challenging and pushes us out of our comfort zones, it’s the right thing to do.” When a congregation is in that place, then the tension is not there.

But the tension usually exists. Maybe not with the whole church, but perhaps with a large chunk of it. Or perhaps with a particularly influential few people

who, were they to be upset by a decision and leave, could dramatically impact the life of that church. For instance, a man once walked into the office of a local church. He walked up to the receptionist, and in a loud voice demanded: “Take me to see the head hog.” The receptionist replied indignantly: “Sir, I’ll ask you not to refer to our pastor in such a way. Around here, we address our ministers with respect.” The man replied, “Well I’ve come to donate 5 million dollars to the church.” “Excuse me sir,” the receptionist replied, “Let me see if I can find the fat pig for you.” ☺  
Sometimes we cave in...we give in.

So, a pastor, and other church leaders as well, have to ask themselves: Who or what do I fear most: Do I fear the congregation I serve, or do I fear the God of the universe whom I serve? (Fear and who we serve are connected.) Whom do I fear more? Is the mission and ministries of our church going to be driven by what introduces people to Jesus and shapes his disciples to be more genuine disciples, or are we going to be driven by personal desires, wants, needs, power, and so forth?

**It is very tempting to fear people more than God.** After all, they’re the people of the church are the ones we see each week, who give each week, who serve each week as volunteers...in many instances they’ve been a part of a particular church longer than the pastor has been, and have a lot of influence. How many of you, for example, have been here at Rose Hill longer than 10 years? [5% of hands at 9:30, probably 50-60% at 11:00.] Then, you’ve been here longer than me, and there’s a good chance that you have a certain kind of influence and power in the church that is tempting for a pastor like me to let influence decisions over and above the influence and power of God.

When that happens, we fear people more than we fear God. And yet, I think all of us who call ourselves Christians would agree it’s better to fear God than to fear people. We would agree with that principle. Living it out can be hard. Our passage from 1 Peter this morning touches on this subject of fear, with an encouragement to fear God. We are in **1 Peter 1:17-21** this morning. A short stretch of 5 verses; God’s word to you and me today.

Remember, Peter is writing to Christians scattered throughout what is modern-day Turkey, and the culture in which they are living is not in alignment with Christian values and beliefs. **Sermon series graphic.** In that sense, much like our own, they are exiles...they are foreigners...they are strangers in their own land. And we see that in this first verse as he tells them to live out their time as foreigners here...and to do so in “reverent fear.” The one they are to fear is the one they call on as he says here as well: their Father. Not their earthly father, but their heavenly father.

That is made even more clear in the rest of the verses where he goes on to describe what God has done for them and how God had redeemed them from “the empty way of life” of their ancestors with the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ death on the cross is what brings us into a right relationship with God. That death was the once-for-all sacrifice – like the spotless, blemish-free sacrificial lamb of the Old Testament. Jesus’ death is that sacrifice for us. And so, through Jesus, we believe in God – as he writes in verse 21 – who raised Jesus from the dead. That’s where our faith and our hope reside: in God, who has done this thing through Jesus Christ.

But the imperative piece of all this... **The phrase that drives these verses is this command, “...live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.”** The rest is just reminding them who they fear, and why. You may know that the most frequent command in Scripture is not to fear/fear not, etc.. And yet, here Peter tells them to live with fear...specifically, with reverent fear. And who they fear is not their neighbor. It’s not those who make them feel like foreigners, perhaps belittling them for their faith, and mocking them for not participating in social gatherings and cultural festivals...or whatever it may be, that don’t line up with their Christian faith.

By the way, in chapter 4 we get a glimpse of what was actually going on that these Christians were not engaging in, but were being mocked and shunned for it as a result. And it’s stuff they used to participate in, but their faith has transformed them: **“For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on**

**you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Peter 4:3-5).** So, there you go; that's what they were facing.

So, fearing them is not the command. Fearing God is. Living with this reverent fear, this filled-with-awe fear, is what he tells them to do. Now, when we think of "fear" we often think of being scared and cowering in someone's presence. I remember when I was a kid I was always kind of fearful of going down into this one back room in the basement of my parents' house...my dad's workshop, in and through which we'd go to get things like suitcases, certain sports gear, wrapping paper, etc. I'd run out of there as fast as I could once I turned the light off. But that kind of fear is not what we're really talking about. That fear leads us to *run from* someone; to avoid them, to get away from them.

The fear written of here, is a fear that leads us to *please* whoever it is we fear. **If we think of it in the negative, perhaps it helps: we fear displeasing someone, so we do whatever we can to make them happy, so they will like us.** So they won't "drop" us. We have a phrase to describe people who tend to be this way, and we call them "people-pleasers." At a certain level, it's healthy. We don't want to live in such a way that people hate us. That's the other end of the spectrum and is no good, either. But in between the two is a middle ground, and that's when people respect us. People can respect you, even if you don't always please them and do what they want.

Parents deal with this all the time. On one hand, we want our kids to like us. Who wants to raise a child who hates their parents, right? Certainly, no parent sets out to do that. But, if a parent only lives to please their child and bows to their every whim so the child is always happy and getting what he or she wants, then the child grows up spoiled and with a skewed view of life. We parents are called to live in such a way, and parent our children in such a way, that our children fear us – as in, they want to please us. Not the other way around. They have a healthy fear of us.

And again, it's not a fear so they run away from us and are scared. **It's a fear that leads to respecting the parent, and a desire to do what is right. This**

**is how we are to be in our relationship with God.** We are to fear him...we are to desire to please him...and we are to desire that more than we desire to fear or please people. This is how we fight fear with fear. When we fear how others will receive us and we're tempted to minimize our faith, we can remember that our fear of God, our desire to please God, ought to be greater than our desire to please our fellow human beings.

So, when we have an opportunity to share our faith – and that can take on a number of forms, from telling a co-worker what we did over the weekend including going to church, to asking a neighbor if we can pray for them in addition to bringing them a meal as they grieve the loss of a spouse, to asking a friend what they believe about God or what they think Christians believe (chapter 2 of the “Exiles” book mentions this question – it’s excellent!) – when we have an opportunity like that, and we *don't* step out in faith and engage that spiritual conversation because we're afraid of upsetting them...because we fear they'll drop us as a friend or they'll think we're weird, or whatever...when we do that we are pleasing *them* rather than pleasing *God*. (And let's not mistake this kind of fear for “being shrewd/wise” about sharing our faith – they're two different things.) We are living in fear of them and placating them, rather than living in a fear of God that drives us to please him.

**So: When the Bible speaks of “fearing God” it's not a fear that causes us to cower.** Healthy fear in a parent-child relationship doesn't lead to the child cowering in fear. If that was your experience, then there's some counseling and deep work that needs to happen to help you work through that. In healthy parent-child relationships, the parent loves the child unconditionally, so the fear that the child has leads the child toward the parent.

Similarly, God loves you and me unconditionally. He's not out to get us. But a healthy fear of him leads us to please him, to do what he invites, asks, and commands us to do. Jesus experienced this. His only aim was to do his heavenly Father's will. To please his heavenly father. Yes, he wanted people to follow him and listen to him and carry out ministry in his name...but Jesus never compromised on pleasing his heavenly Father in an effort to please people and hope they might then join his cause.

And so, he invites us to do the same. When fear of others tempts us to placate and please them rather than authentically living our faith, we want to remember that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and we want to please God first. We want to do his will above anyone else's. Elliot Clark puts it well in the *Exiles* book, when he writes this on page 53, **“We see that being ready with the gospel doesn't involve completely eliminating our dread, but redirecting it. We recognize the greatest hindrance to our evangelism isn't necessarily a stifling fear, but a lack of fear. This revelation helps us understand how fearing God can actually be the remedy to any and all fears which would otherwise silence our witness”** (*Evangelism as Exiles*, p. 53).

So, if we are struggling to live our faith in a way that positively impacts others outside of the church and draws them toward Jesus, maybe we're fearing people too much, and not fearing God enough. Maybe we're pleasing them too much, and not pleasing God. In those situations, we're no longer walking in the footsteps of Jesus. We're not living a Christ-like life. In fact, Jesus warned us against this when he says in Matthew 10, **“So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell”** (Jesus, in Matt. 10:26–28).

I mean, this passage – especially verse 28 – is probably not on too many peoples' lists of “favorite passages to read when I need comforting from God's word” right? But sometimes we don't need comforting. We need challenging. Isn't that what good parents do with their kids – they know when to comfort and when to challenge? Why would we expect anything less from our heavenly father? He's going to challenge us sometimes, including through Jesus' teaching. And when we understand fear rightly, and realize that those whom we fear are the ones we'll seek to serve and placate and please, then we can readily acknowledge that, yes, we'd rather fear God than fear people.

**Maybe this morning we need to be challenged a little by what Jesus says, and by what Peter writes, so we'd seek to fear God and please Him more than the world around us.** We might especially need a little challenge from God when it comes to living with our faith on our shirtsleeve, and being open and honest about what we believe...authentically being disciples of Jesus. Not disciples of a political party or an employer or a sports team like the Seattle Mariners...or anything else that we're more likely to be open and honest about ourselves...but authentically being disciples of Jesus. There's a tension there...a tug of war between the world around and God. It's not something that just pastors face...we all do. Let's please God first and live our faith authentically in relationship with others, right where we live, work, and play. Let's pray...Amen.