

2 Corinthians 7:1

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[0 : 00] Be afraid. Be very afraid. This rather somber warning, though usually employed in a light-hearted manner, was the trailer for a 1980s horror film called *The Fly*. And the language, be afraid, be very afraid is very suitable for advertising a horror film. But it would seem less suitable, to put it mildly, in speaking of the Christian life. And yet, the Bible often speaks of and commends the fear of God as that which should characterize the believer. We are to be characterized by. We are to know. We are to experience. We are to evidence the fear of God in our lives. We are to fear God. Indeed, we are commanded to fear God. Now, this morning, we were considering a verse in 1 Peter, 1 Peter 1 and verse 17. And in that verse, believers are exhorted in the light of God's judgment, in the light of God as judge, to live in fear. We can just read the verse to remind ourselves, and perhaps for the benefit of those who were not able to be here this morning. Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. It's interesting that the word that Peter employs is just one word. It's the word fear. And in some translations, they choose to translate it with one word. In the NIV, there is this introduction of, I suppose, a descriptive word that would give further light as to the meaning, and we read of reverent fear.

We've already noticed how in 2 Corinthians, the word fear is simply replaced by the word reverence. But the actual word that Peter uses is the word fear. Indeed, the Greek word is one that we would recognize because we have English words that derive from it. The Greek word is *phobos*. Of course, we know of phobias. They are fears of one thing or another. And so, 1 Peter exhorts believers in the light of God as judge to live in fear. That's really literally what he says, live in fear. Now, that expression, those words, they do, I think, I don't know how you respond to them, but I think for many, they would grate somewhat that as believers we would be exhorted to live in fear. The picture that seems to be painted by this language is a picture that we recoil from. That's not the kind of life I want to live. I don't want to live in fear. Those of us who accept that the language of Scripture can't simply be dismissed, and I hope we all fall into that category, we feel that we need to quickly explain what the language does not mean. Often you hear as the theme of the fear of God is broached or comes up in a sermon. It's interesting how so often we are quick to explain what it doesn't mean, very quick to ensure that everybody understands that we're not talking here about terror, and so on and so forth. And of course, that's true. But I wonder if sometimes in our rush to explain what it doesn't mean what it doesn't mean, we fail to give consideration to what it does mean.

And maybe we prefer to just leave to one side this command, this imperative, this manner of living that is commended to us to live in fear, to live in the fear of God.

It's interesting, and I think revealing, how even in Christian conversation today, if indeed the language of God-fearing comes up at all, it seldom does, but if it does come up and a Christian is described as God-fearing, somehow that sounds very old-fashioned, something from another era, not something that we would speak or a description we would often use today.

[4 : 46] And yet God's desire and revealed will for us is that we be God-fearing believers. Now, as I've already commented, we mentioned this morning that we would return to this theme, and we're going to do so by considering a verse in 2 Corinthians, where the construction, the phrase, fear of God, is employed in the context of what I can only describe as a stunning and exciting demand, that we would perfect holiness, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

If you turn to 2 Corinthians in chapter 7, if you have your Bibles open there, that's probably the best place to have them open, even though we will be referring to some other passages or other texts. But notice there in verse 7, since we have these promises, sorry, in verse 1 of chapter 7, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves and everything that contaminates body

and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God, or I would suggest preferably in the fear of God.

Perfecting holiness in the fear of God. Now, we want to spend most of our time this evening considering this phrase, the fear of God, as it is used in this verse, but also drawing for other biblical material that can help us construct an outline, if you wish, of what the Bible would have us understand by this term, the fear of God.

But our starting point, even though we will broaden it out and look at this in a more thematic way, rather than in considering one verse. But our starting point is this verse in 2 Corinthians chapter 7, and this stunning demand that we are to perfect holiness.

[6 : 39] I want to think a little bit about this verse as we move towards our consideration of this phrase, the fear of God. First thing I want you to notice concerning this demand, this stunning demand that we are to perfect holiness is the wonderful reason that Paul gives for perfecting holiness.

And the reason is implicit in the words with which the verse begins. Paul says, since we have these promises, the very line of argument, the very way of arguing that Peter employs in the verse we were thinking about this morning.

Since you call on a Father who judges, live your lives. Well, here it's, since we have these promises, then let us purify ourselves, perfecting holiness.

And so, these promises, whatever they are, and we're going to notice in a moment what they are, they are the wonderful reason that Paul gives for us to perfect holiness, to make that a priority, to make it something that we want to do, something that we are conscious that we need to do.

Why? Because of these promises. Well, the promises that Paul is referring to are the promises that he has been speaking of in the previous chapter.

[8 : 00] From verse 16, as he reminds the believers of words that God had already said, promises that God had already given. We take up the reading in the second half of verse 16, as God has said.

And here we have the promises. The promises that are provided as this wonderful reason for perfecting holiness. And what are they? I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Then in verse 18, I will be a father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty. God's promises to be their God, to be their Father, to live with them and walk among them.

They are rich and precious promises. But they are promises that carry with them an implication, or if you wish, ethical imperative. Those among whom God will walk must live in a manner that is fitting, given the company that we enjoy.

God is our company. He promises to walk among us. And if He does indeed, as we are assured He does, for He keeps His promises. If He is walking among us, then we can do no other than live in a way that is fitting, given that He is amongst us, that He walks amongst us.

[9 : 28] And so, Paul says, perfect holiness. You are holy, but perfect holiness, because God is walking amongst us. And so, this is what you must do.

Those who enjoy the privilege of God as their Father, as the second promise, if you wish, or as the one promise is developed, those who enjoy the privilege of God as Father are to live in a manner appropriate to sons and daughters of a holy Father.

And so, Paul says, given these wonderful promises of what God has promised to do, to live with us, to walk amongst us, to be our Father in the light of that, perfect holiness.

We might call the motivation that Paul is identifying as the motivation of fitting gratitude. Not just gratitude, but fitting gratitude.

Wonderful promises, wonderful truths. And the fitting response is that we would perfect holiness. Since we have these promises, we can do no other than purify ourselves, than perfect holiness.

[10 : 39] But we now turn to what we've called a stunning and exciting demand. We've spoken the words several times already, perfecting holiness, but we want to think a little bit more about what that means.

And I would suggest that the phrase, perfecting holiness, implies both a present privileged reality and an exciting prospect. First of all, what is the present privileged reality?

Well, you can't perfect something that does not already exist. Paul is saying to the Christians, you have to perfect holiness. Well, as I say, you can't perfect something if it doesn't already exist. And so, what Paul is saying is you are already holy. You are already holy, but this is something that you must perfect. Holiness must be in the conception of Paul as he is understanding the word, and we're going to think a little bit more of what it means in a moment, but it must be in Paul's conception a present possession of the believer if he is exhorting them to perfect holiness. Now, we know that the word holy is used in two overlapping ways in the Bible. Holy as in separate and holy in reference to lifestyle or behavior, though these things are very much connected. [11:57] Indeed, in this passage, they are intricately connected, and the word is used in both senses. Notice in verse 17 of chapter 6, Paul is reminding them of this demand that they are to be separate.

They are to be holy. And yet, he immediately goes on in verse 1 of chapter 7 to speak of the need to purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit.

Now, that could be understood in different ways, but it surely refers to, among other things, certainly, holy living. And so, this meaning of holy as being separate, this meaning of holy as growing in holiness, of sanctification as we sometimes speak of it, both are being dealt with in the language that Paul is using.

And of this holiness, Paul says, perfect it. Perfect holiness. The language that is used is translated in other versions as, bring it to completion.

And the word translated perfect can have that sense. And of course, if we translate it in that way, it really just reinforces what we've already said. You can't bring to completion something that hasn't begun.

[13:18] And so, what Paul is saying is, this has begun. This work has begun in your life. This holiness that I speak of is a present possession. It's a privileged reality. But I exhort you to bring it to completion, to perfect holiness.

So, a privileged reality, but also the language speaks of an exciting prospect. Yes, we are already holy. We are already set apart by God.

We are even already, though sometimes it may not seem so, in a measure characterized by holy living, in greater or lesser degree.

But the exciting prospect that Paul sets before us is that we are to perfect holiness. We are to aim for and aspire to perfection. We are, in the language of our passage in 1 Peter, to be holy because I am holy, says the Lord.

What does this involve? What is involved in perfecting holiness? How will we progress to perfect holiness? Well, Paul tells us, he certainly gives us some indication of what is involved.

[14:28] There in verse 1, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit. This surely is involved in the matter of perfecting holiness.

And of course, this purifying ourselves of everything that contaminates, it involves self-examination, that we would be aware of what it is that is contaminating us.

It involves decision, the decision to purify ourselves. Let us purify ourselves. Paul is joining with them and saying, let us resolve to do this.

We examine ourselves, we see where things are not as they ought to be, and we resolve to purify ourselves. It involves discipline. It involves effort, unwavering effort.

It's not an easy matter to purify ourselves of everything that contaminates. But this exciting prospect is laid before us, that we would perfect holiness.

[15:27] But then we have, and this brings us to the matter of the fear of God. We have what I'm calling, it's maybe not the best way of describing it, a jarring requirement. And by this, I'm referring to our theme that we now turn to, the fear of God.

Paul is clear that we can only perfect holiness in the fear of God, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God, or as I'm suggesting, preferably, in the fear of God.

In the absence of such fear, we are devoid of both the motivation and the manner by which we are to perfect holiness. What then can we say of this matter, the fear of God?

And at this point, we move away from a narrow focus on our text to consider the subject more thematically. I want to sketch out a structure of what I want to say, and what I'll say in each of these points will be very brief.

This is a thumbnail sketch, perhaps, of how we might understand the biblical conception of the fear of God. It is a huge subject matter. The material is ample and extensive.

[16:31] And so, this morning, or this evening, rather, our objective is a modest one, a sketch that I hope will be helpful. And the outline of the sketch, as we think of this matter, the fear of God is as follows.

We know, and so we fear. And I'll come to that in a moment. We sin, and so we fear. We are, and so we fear. Now, that's a little bit cryptic, but I hope I'll be able to explain it.

But then I'll go on to say the following. We fear, and so we worship. We fear, and so we obey. We fear, and so we grow. First of all, we know, and so we fear.

What do I mean by that? Well, what I mean by that is this, that the fear of God begins with the knowledge of God. The more we know God, the more we will fear God. The absence of the fear of God in society, and in the lives of Christians, in our lives, can be directly attributed to an absence of the knowledge of God, or certainly to a defective knowledge of God.

I want us to turn briefly to the passage that we read in Isaiah chapter 6, and verses 1 to 5. And my primary interest in these verses in Isaiah is in what we are told of the angels, and how the angels respond to the presence of God.

[18:03] I think without going into detail, for time does not allow us to do so, I think even a cursory reading of this passage, and we've already read the passage, would allow us to declare, even if the language of fear is not used, it allows us to declare that the angels fear God.

That, I think, is an entirely reasonable thing to say. The way in which they are described, clearly, is a description of creatures who fear God. They cover their faces in the presence of God.

They cry out, holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. Here are creatures, the seraphims, and they fear God. Now, why is that interesting and helpful for us as we consider this matter we know and so we fear?

Well, it's interesting because here are creatures who fear God in the absence of sin. They are not sinful. The seraphs know nothing of sin.

They are sinless creatures, and yet they fear God. And that's important, because we ought not to imagine that the fear of God is only a matter that should be a feature of sinners such as we are.

[19:18] We might say, well, yes, obviously sinners will fear God, and indeed sinners ought to fear God. But here we have the seraphs, sinless, and yet they fear God. And why do they fear God?

Well, they fear God because of who He is, because of who they know He is, because of what they see He is. His glory and majesty and power and holiness provoke, and rightly so, in the seraphs, fear.

They know God, and so they fear God. And so with us. The more we know God, the more we will and must fear God. Where here the word fear speaks of deep reverence and trembling respect for God as God.

So we know, and so we fear. But we can also say that we sin, and so we fear. It was important to begin by stressing that the fear of God is appropriate for creatures irrespective of sin.

But of course, sin does bring something new and unwelcome to the table in our discussion. The fear of Isaiah has an aspect that is not to be found in the angels in the passage we've read.

[20:31] Because first we read of the seraphs and how they demonstrate their fear. But then we come to the prophet. And he also fears God. But in his fear, there is this new element of sin.

Sin intensifies or introduces a new element to our fear of God.

Perhaps in two ways. Sin serves to amplify the otherness of God, to deepen the gulf between creator and creature, the gulf between God and sinless angels is immense.

But the gulf between God and sinners, well, what a great gulf, what a great chasm. And so sin intensifies the appropriateness, if you wish, of fearing a God.

But I think sin also introduces the element of fear in regard to our recognition that sin has consequences, that sin deserves to be punished.

[21:45] How will God deal with our sin? What punishment will He justly mete out? And so we fear, and rightly so, because of our sin. And I think this is why we need to be careful not to simply replace the word fear with reverence.

I'm not saying that to do so is wrong, but I think we need to be careful if we're going to go down that road of sanitizing, if you wish, the Bible and taking from it words that we find a little bit uncomfortable and say, well, reverence.

We prefer reverence to fear. Let's be careful of that. Because if we appreciate that the fear that is appropriate to sinners involves a recognition of the consequences of sin and the just punishment that follows from sin, then I think the word fear is altogether appropriate.

And the word reverence, though it is also appropriate, doesn't capture the picture sufficiently. The fear that Peter speaks of in 1 Peter 1, in verse 17, concerns, at least in part, this element of sin-induced fear.

Fear of God's temporal judgment and discipline. What Peter is saying to the believers that he's writing to, he's saying, you should fear God, you should live in fear. Why? Because He is a judge. [23 : 06] Now, if you are sinless, then you have no reason to fear a judge. But if you're a sinner, then you have reason to fear a judge. And we, even as believers, though we stand protected, and we thank God for that by the blood of Christ, we, as we were noticing this morning, are subject to the temporal judgment of God.

And that, Peter assures us, should motivate us to live in fear, in fear of God as our judge. So we know, and so we fear.

We sin, and so we fear. But also, we are, and so we fear. What are we that provokes fear? Well, we are God's children. This is the great promise that Paul presents as the motivation for perfecting holiness.

He is our Father. We might say, well, does this not remove our fear? Well, yes and no. Martin Luther makes a helpful distinction between servile and filial fear.

Servile fear is the fear of a servant or slave under the yoke of a tyrannical master. Filial fear is the proper fear or respect of a son towards his father.

[24 : 17] It involves two elements that are inextricably joined, two sides of the same coin, we might say. A fear of God's disapproval and discipline as sons, and a desire for God's smile and approval as sons and daughters.

And this is the fear that comes from who we are. We are sons and daughters, and as sons and daughters, there is a fear that is appropriate. So we sin, or rather, we know, and so we fear.

We sin, and so we fear. But also, we are. We are sons and daughters of God, and so we fear in our condition as sons and daughters. These are sentiments that belong to sons and daughters.

There is a fear that is born of who we are as God's children. But let's quickly move on to just notice this. What are the right and happy consequences of biblical fear?

Well, I've suggested three things. First, we fear, and so we worship. The passage we've read in Isaiah illustrates this necessary consequence of the fear of God. Worship that goes beyond attendance at church services, important though that is, to the very lives that we live, and the holiness we endeavor to perfect.

[25 : 33] We fear, and so we worship. Fear of God is a good thing because it drives us to our knees in worship and in service.

Very related to that, we can say this. We fear, and so we obey. Paul is exhorting the believers in Corinth to purify themselves. We've already suggested that this was a difficult task.

It was an onerous duty. It was no easy matter. And why would they do so? Why would they put so much effort into purifying themselves from all that contaminates?

Why obey God? Well, the fear of God in the heart of man motivates and spurs on to obedience. In the words of John Murray, the fear of God is the soul of godliness.

We fear, and so we obey. This is a happy consequence of a right fear of God that we would seek urgently to obey God. This is the final thing I want to say, and there is so much more that could be said.

[26 : 37] But as I say, this evening, my desire or my objective has been to give a sketch that perhaps as opportunity affords, we can return to and develop some of the elements more fully.

But the final thing I do want to say with regard to the happy consequences of the fear of God is that we fear, and so we grow. Now, that is true of us as individual believers, and thus far our focus has been somewhat individualistic as we thought about the fear of God and the experience of the individual believer.

But we do well to note that the New Testament connects the growth of the church to the fear of God manifested in the life of the church.

Very particularly, there is a very revealing and helpful verse in Acts chapter 9 and verse 31, and I'll just quickly read that to you.

Now, Acts chapter 9 and verse 31. It's a summary of the condition of the church and the growth of the church. And notice what we read, Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace.

[27 : 47] It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. It grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. This very encouraging picture is painted of the church growing, of the church maturing, of the church extending itself throughout the land.

And notice how that is intimately connected to the church living in the fear of God. It's also interesting in that regard to notice how Paul, in this same letter to the Corinthians, in 2 Corinthians, where we've been thinking a little of chapter 7 and verse 1.

It's interesting to notice what he says in chapter 5 and verse 11 on this same theme. There we read, Since then we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. Paul here identifies a connection between knowing what it is to fear God and the task of persuading men.

Tying in with what we see in Acts about the church growing and expanding and maturing as they lived in the fear of God. And so we fear and so we grow.

The fear of God. We trust that we would continue to understand more fully what that means and what that involves and that it would be something that would characterize us as individuals and as a church.

[29 : 14] God grant that it may be so. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you this evening and we do thank you for your Word. We thank you for this great theme that we can ponder on.

We thank you for so much in your Word that gives us instruction in this matter. We pray that we would be those who are concerned to live in the fear of God.

That we would know what it is to honor and reverence and respect you. And indeed, to know what it is as sinners to fear your judgment upon us. Lord, we pray that you would grant to us a right and proper biblical balance in our consideration of these matters.

We know that we are prone to go to extremes. We find it difficult to identify and live in our lives a life that does justice to your Word.

And in this matter, we do ask for your help and direction by your Spirit. Lord, we do pray that you would help us to know you better. For we are persuaded that it is as we would know you more, so we will fear you more.

[30 : 31] We thank you that as sons and daughters there is this right and fitting place for fear in our condition as sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. Lord, we do thank you for the very happy and blessed consequences of lives that are lived in the fear of God.

And we pray that we would know something of that in our own lives as believers and in our life as a congregation. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I will close our service this evening by singing words that we find in Psalm 25.

On page 231 in the Scottish Psalter, Psalm 25, so that's the first version of the psalm, and we'll sing from verse 10 to verse 14, singing to the tune Franconia.

The whole paths of the Lord are truth and mercy sure to those that do His covenant keep and testimonies pure. Now, for Thine own name's sake, O Lord, I the entreat to pardon my iniquity, for it is very great.

Psalm 25, verses 10 to 14. We'll stand to sing. Amen. For it is very good.

[32 : 12] For it is very good. And this Withers A may not be used for the Lord for the Lord that they sinned, or who are They true.

Who are they enjoying and God's rīçaring for the Lord and what they can't pray. Now, for they use theiribles for their troop Iniquity, for it is very great.

What man is he that fears the Lord and does it serve?

Him shall he teach the way that he shall choose and still observe.

His soul shall dwell at ease and his prosperity.

[33 : 27] Shall flourish still and of the earth inheritors shall be.

With those that fear him is the secret of the Lord.

The knowledge of his covenant he will to them afford.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen. Amen.