Taking God Seriously

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by Michael L. Gowens

The sense of reverential awe toward God that Scripture calls “the fear of the Lord” manifests itself in an attitude that takes Him seriously. God is real in the perceptions of the man who fears Him. He is not a mere abstract concept.

In this day of appalling superficiality, how crucial it is to recover a sense of awareness that “God means business”! The kind of bright and breezy approach to contemporary worship that values laughter above learning and brevity above substance is foreign to the spirit and teaching of the New Testament.

Writing about the deep seriousness of a London church pastored by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the biographer comments on “the silence which prevailed in the large congregation. The stillness generally deepened as the service proceeded...Regular worshippers at Westminster Chapel had no problem in explaining this stillness...In the words of [a] student from Jamaica, ‘It was as if I lost all count of time and space. The eternal truth that I hungered for so deeply was being revealed, and I was caught up body, mind and spirit in the sublime experience of receiving, finding, understanding, knowing...What I experienced was the power of the Word’.”

Of course, this kind of reverent atmosphere cannot be manufactured on command without sliding precariously into legalism. But where deep convictions regarding the holiness of God and authority of His word prevail, the result will be a profoundly sobering and enriching experience of public worship.

Paul’s regular use of the sophron root (translated “sober”) in the pastoral epistles indicates that this attitude of seriousness should mark the believer’s entire life, not simply his public worship. Ministers are to be sober—or serious-minded—not frivolous (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). So are Christian women (1 Tim. 2:9), children (1 Tim. 2:15), aged men (Titus 2:2), and young men (Titus 2:6). In fact, grace teaches us that all of life is to be lived “soberly” (Titus 2:12).
There are basically three areas in which a deep seriousness should mark the life of the believer. God would have His people serious about His Word, about Sin, and about His Chastening Rod.

**Taking His Word Seriously**

First, the person who fears God will take His word seriously. He will not lightly dismiss the word of God, turn a deaf ear to it, or attempt to alter it, but will tremble and meekly receive it as the word of the living God (Is. 66:2,5; Ezra 9:4; 10:3; Jas. 1:21; 1 Ths. 2:13).

Godly King Josiah’s response to God’s word illustrates the seriousness with which a person should approach the word of God. The Lord said to him, “Because thine heart was tender, and thou didst humble thyself before God, when thou hearest his words against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, and humblest thyself before me, and didst rend thy clothes, and weep before me; I have even heard thee also, saith the Lord” (2 Chr. 34:27).

Exodus 9:13-25 records the plague of hail upon the land of Egypt: “He that feared the word of the Lord among the servants of Pharoah made his servants and his cattle flee into the houses: and he that regarded not the word of the Lord left his servants and his cattle in the field” (vs. 20-21). To “fear God’s word” then, is equivalent to “regarding” or taking seriously His word.

The individual who takes seriously the word of God does not approach the word with a “take-it-or-leave-it” attitude. He does not pick and choose what to affirm and what to deny—whether its emphasis on special creation, miracles, human depravity, or Divine wrath—but acquiesces to the authority of the whole Bible.

John Bunyan insists that men should fear the word of the Lord because of the Author, for “the word of a king is as the roaring of a lion; where the word of a king is, there is power” (Ecc. 8:14). The absence of this fear expresses itself by a spirit that “mocks the messengers of God, despises His words, and misuses His prophets” (2 Chr. 36:16). The words of Solomon are sobering: “Whoso despiseth the word shall be destroyed: but he that feareth the commandment shall be rewarded” (Pro. 13:13).

The catalyst of the original sin was Satan’s daring assault on the integrity of the
word of God (Gen. 3:1). Since that day in the Garden of Eden, he has continued his sinister effort to change God’s word. But God gives three warnings against an impudent treatment of His word—one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end of the Bible (Deut. 4:2; Pro. 30:6; Rev. 22:18-19).

He doesn’t take kindly to the pride of human critique and maverick innovation. In fact, God has always dealt severely with religious daredevils who presumed to edit His revealed will.

Consider the case of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10. When these two sons of Aaron presumed to innovate the prescribed order of Divine worship by offering “strange fire” upon the altar, God struck them dead on the spot. When Aaron complained at the severity of the judgment, Moses replied, “This is that the Lord spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh unto me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace” (Lev. 10:4). In his 400 pages on this text, the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs comments, “Though the lives of men are dear and precious to God, yet they are not so precious as His glory…if we knew what the glory of God meant, we would not think it so much that the lives of so many men should go for the glory of God. It is mercy that our lives have not gone many times for God’s glory.”

Consider also the case of Uzzah (1 Chr. 13:7-11). Uzzah, a Kohathite, was responsible for bringing the ark of the covenant back to Jerusalem. When the oxen stumbled, Uzzah reached up his hand to steady the ark, and God smote him dead. What appears on the surface to be an extreme reaction of excessive severity is really a case of perfect justice. You see, the Kohathites had been explicitly commanded not to “touch” any of the holy things (Num. 4:15). His act was not innocent—it was presumptuous. He disregarded God’s word in the name of pragmatism.

Taking God’s word seriously is a matter of paying attention to Scripture—of taking it personally—of listening to it, conscious that God is speaking to us through it. This matter of learning to listen more carefully is illustrated by an experience our son Jared had when he was six. Writing about his experience a couple of years later in an essay he titled “The Day I Got Left at Home,” he said:

Wait! Oh no! They left me. One night we had to go to church. My dad told me to
go to the van, but I was in the backyard instead. Then I heard the van leave. I ran up the hill. When I got up there they were gone. I felt tears come down my eyes. I started to cry. I thought I would never see them again. I would be alone. I thought bad guys would come and get me. Finally I went to my neighbor’s house and asked if they could drive me to my church. They said, “O.K.” When we got there my mom was sitting on the bench. At first, I thought she was going to be mad at me, but when I sat down she hugged me. From now on, I learned to be where my dad tells me to be, and where I am supposed to be.

The Lord knows how to bring His children to the point of confessing, “From now on, I will be where He tells me to be. I will do what He tells me to do. I will take His word seriously.”

Taking Sin Seriously
Further, the individual who fears the Lord will take sin seriously. In days of affluence and ease, people tend to excuse sin and fear suffering. Our society laughs at sin and complains against God for suffering. The person who fears the Lord, however, agrees with Burroughs who said, “Sin is more to be feared than suffering.” If modern Christians feared sin as much as they fear suffering, who knows what could be accomplished for the kingdom of God!

God will not allow His people to get away with sin. He is serious about the purity of the church. Consider the case of Ananias and Sapphira recorded in Acts 5:1-11.

Some of the believers in the early church had voluntarily liquidated their assets and contributed the proceeds to the church. Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property and pretended to give the entire amount. It was a strictly voluntary act. They were not required either to sell the land or to give the entire amount. When Ananias brought the money to Peter, the Lord struck him dead. Satan had “filled his heart to lie to the Holy Ghost.”

When his wife came into the assembly later, not knowing what had happened to her husband, Peter asked, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” She replied, “Yes, that was the price.” Then Peter said, “How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out,” and she fell dead as well (v. 9).
What was their sin? Were they punished because they refused to sacrifice everything? No. God had never required them to sacrifice everything. Instead, they were judged because they pretended to sacrifice everything while they secretly kept back part of the proceeds. Such dishonesty would set a dangerous precedent in the church and God judged it swiftly and severely. God made these two an example to all who might be tempted to trifle with sin.

What was the effect of this first act of Divine discipline in the church? The result was that “great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things” (v. 11). I can well imagine.

Commenting on verse eleven, John MacArthur writes about the effect that this display of Divine discipline had on the church: “You can be certain there was a lot of careful self-examination going on in the Jerusalem church that day. And that was the point. God was purifying His church. He wanted His people to take sin seriously. He wanted to discourage shallow commitment. He wanted the people to fear Him…The issue is not what unbelievers think about such severity; it is what God thinks about such iniquity.”

**Taking His Chastening Rod Seriously**

An old adage says, “There are times when a person must be cruel to be kind.” Though we tend to recoil at the thought, yet it expresses an axiomatic principle for life. Every doctor knows that he must sometimes cause temporary pain for the long-term welfare of the patient. It is a difficult task for the physician to inject a needle of anesthesia into a deep cut and the patient may think the doctor is being unusually severe, but if the wound is to be stitched for healing, the temporary “cruelty” is actually an expression of kindness, for it aims at the patient’s long-term welfare. It is in his best interest.

This principle is the basis of applying the rod of correction in child-training. Though it is an unpleasant task from which every parent naturally shrinks, it is something he must do, for “foolishness is bound in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction will drive it far from him” (Pro. 29:15,17; 19:18). Though the child may think the parent especially cruel, discipline is really a proof of love (Pro. 13:24).
The Lord also disciplines His children because He loves them (Pro. 3:12; Rev. 3:19). In fact, the absence of the experience of Divine chastening in an individual’s life is evidence that a person is not a child of God (Heb. 12:6-8).

How is Divine chastening a proof of love? In terms of the fact that God loves his children enough to train them. The rod of correction is the Father’s child-training program to grow His children to spiritual maturity: “He [chastens us] for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness” (Heb. 12:10).

The chastening rod of God, however, is not pleasant and no one who has ever experienced it would court the experience of the Heavenly Father’s frown. When he is chastened, though, the believer does not doubt God’s love—he does not fear eternal punishment (1 Jno. 4:17)—but at the same time, he soon develops a healthy respect for the rod of correction and an understanding that willful defiance will bring punishment.

Discipline is not intended to be an enjoyable experience, “but grievous”; nevertheless, over time, it “yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them that are exercised thereby” (Heb. 12:11). By His chastening rod, God teaches His children that disobedience brings painful consequences and, little by little, they learn to submit to His word (Ps. 119:67,71).

At the dedication of the temple, Solomon prayed that God would answer the prayers of His people, "that they may fear thee, to walk in thy ways” (2 Chr. 6:31). The words teach that godly fear expresses itself in obedience to God. Elder Joe Holder writes, “Fearing God enough to walk in his ways when the masses around us are walking in another direction and pushing us to get in step is what this lesson is all about.” This is the end at which He aims in Divine chastening. We learn obedience by the things that we suffer. We learn to take God seriously.

*Thy people, Lord, have ever found, ’tis good to bear Thy rod;*
*Afflictions make us learn Thy will, and lean upon our God.*
*This is the comfort we enjoy when new distress begins;*
*We read Thy word, we run Thy way, we hate our former sins.*
*Thy judgments, Lord, are always right, tho’ they may seem severe;*
*The sharpest sufferings we endure, flow from Thy faithful care.*
*Before we knew Thy chastening rod, our feet were apt to stray;*
But now we learn to keep Thy word, nor wander from Thy way.

A Holy Caution
Closely akin to this attitude of seriousness is another component of godly fear—an attitude we might call “holy caution”. In Psalm 34:9-12, David invites others to learn the meaning of "the fear of the Lord": "Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord..." (v. 11). In verses 13-14, David defines "fearing God" in terms of a holy caution to avoid sin and a humble carefulness lest we offend the Lord: "Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it."

The wise person does not live with reckless abandon, like the proverbial bull in a china shop. He doesn’t rush in willy-nilly where angels fear to tread. If the mysterious seraphim who dwell in God’s presence employ four of their six wings in the act of covering their faces and feet (Is. 6:1ff), who are sinful mortals to live heedlessly before Him.

Instead, the wise man, like Hezekiah of old, "goes softly all his years" (Is. 38:15), carefully tiptoeing through the precarious minefield of life, lest he fall into temptation and sin. He “walks circumspectly [lit. carefully and accurately], redeeming the time because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15).

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 presents a graphic description of "holy caution":
Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few...When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it...Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin…but fear thou God.

The “Preacher” encourages his young auditors to exercise an attitude of caution or hesitancy before God in the area of their daily walk (“keep thy foot”), their words, and their vows (or promises).

Many people live carelessly, without consideration of how their words or deeds will affect others. Even more rare is the person who considers the Lord when it comes to judging the appropriateness of behavior: “they consider not that they do
evil” (Ecc. 5:1b). Perhaps it would be well if many older Christians learned to sing the little child’s song again:

*Be careful little lips what you say…*
*For the Lord is up above, He is looking down in love,*
*So be careful little lips what you say.*

The person who fears God knows that sin hides God’s face from him (Is. 59:2), and that unconfessed sin eventually provokes the Lord to abandon the impenitent sinner to the consequences of his own behavior (Rom. 1:24-28; I Jno. 5:16). Furthermore, he is aware that when God withdraws his blessing, favor, and providential intervention in the affairs of daily life, he tends to self-destruct. How quickly life falls apart when the Lord, in his righteous displeasure, removes his restraining influence from our lives! What utter folly it is to offend our gracious God!

**Arises from a Sense of Personal Weakness**
Why does the Christian live with an attitude of caution and carefulness? First, because he is conscious of his own weakness. He knows that he is “prone to wander…prone to leave the God [he] loves.” Experience has taught him his own tendency to stumble and he has learned to distrust himself.

The language of 2 Corinthians 7:11 expresses this point in terms of the many emotions that are generated in a repentant heart: “Ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge!” The Corinthians had learned a painful lesson. Their godly repentance manifested itself in a dramatic change of behavior. They were no longer “puffed up in pride” at their sophisticated and tolerant attitude (1 Cor. 5:2). The pain of sin had generated a more cautious and reverent attitude in them. They now knew just how easily they could be deceived into disobedience.

This awareness of my potential to stumble and to fall prompts me to sing, “I am weak, but Thou art strong; Jesus keep me from all wrong.” Such a mindset is the thought expressed in the last petition of the model prayer: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Mt. 6:13). The request is a parallelism—the second phrase explains the first. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, in other words,
“Lord, keep me from falling, for I know my potential to fall into sin. When I have the inclination, keep me from the opportunity; when I have the opportunity, keep me from the inclination.”

The individual who fears the Lord is conscious of the precarious position he is in by virtue of his fallen nature. He has no illusions of grandeur. He hears the warnings of Scripture—the “take heeds” and “bewares”—as God’s personal “caution signs” to him (Mt. 18:10; Lk. 12:15; 1 Cor. 3:10; Heb. 2:1; Heb. 3:12; Deut. 6:12; Col. 2:8; 2 Pet. 3:17).

What danger we are in of dishonoring the Lord Jesus Christ and discrediting the ongoing work of his kingdom in the earth! Satan knows that if he can make caricatures of God’s people by tempting them to react carnally to the circumstances of life, he has dealt a strategic blow to Christ’s kingdom and robbed the Lord of glory. How carefully we must live, lest we displease our Lord and give the devil a foothold against us! The person who fears God knows his own frailty, weakness, and tendency to wander from the path of godliness. He does not trust himself, but expresses his own helplessness and total dependence on the Lord for strength and grace to be holy.

Arises from a Sense of Divine Privilege
Secondly, this attitude of holy caution arises from an awareness of the preciousness of God’s blessings. Just as a person who had purchased a valuable work of art would be cautious lest the canvas was marred, so the believer who understands the value of Divine grace will exercise care and caution lest he risk the loss of these blessings.

Romans 11:20-21 says, “Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: for if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee.” Paul’s argument to these Gentile Christians is clear: The privileges of the Gospel of Christ call for holy caution, lest we abuse His grace and incur the same judgment suffered by the natural descendants of Abraham.

The twin command to “quench not” and “grieve not the Holy Spirit” (1 Ths. 5:19; Eph. 4:30) argues from this same principle. Sin in the believer’s life shows a lack of concern for and consideration of this Sacred Guest in the soul. When we offend
Him, we offend our best Friend, and rob ourselves of the privileges of His sweet influence in our lives.

The fear of the Lord is an automatic warning system in the soul—a flashing caution signal in the renewed conscience that serves to keep the Christian in the will of God. Like Charles Wesley, every believer should pray

*I want a principle within of watchful, godly fear,*  
*A sensibility of sin, a pain to feel it near.*  
*Help me the first approach to feel of pride or wrong desire;*  
*To catch the wandering of my will,*  
*And quench the kindling fire.*  
*From Thee that I no more may stray,*  
*No more Thy goodness grieve,*  
*Grant me the filial awe, I pray, the tender conscience give.*  
*Quick as the apple of an eye, O God, my conscience make!*  
*Awake my soul when sin is nigh, and keep it still awake.*