

The Importance of Fearing the God You Love

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Aside from atheists and people in false religions, most people would argue that God should be loved. Jesus went so far as to say that the obligation to love God is the foremost commandment in Scripture (see Mark 12:29-30). What is not universally agreed upon is whether or not God should be feared. Some professing Christians, people who claim to love God with all their hearts, have such a sentimental view of God that it seems inconsistent, even insulting to His loving and gracious character, to think of anyone fearing Him. After all, we don't teach our children to fear a kind grandfather or Santa Claus, do we? Why then would we teach them to fear God?

First of all, the comparison of God with grandfathers or Santa Claus is degrading nearly to the point of slander. As one writer notes, "... the sentimental view generates a deity with all the awesome holiness of a cuddly toy."¹ Second, *fearing* God is not the same as *being afraid* of God. The person who fears God in the biblical sense is maintaining a humble reverence for His glory, majesty, dominion, and authority. The person who fears God recognizes that He is not only the Giver of all good things, but also the Lord of the universe and the Judge of sinners. He is the One who creates, and He is the One who has the power to destroy. He is the One who rewards, and He is the One who disciplines. Fearing God, in other words, is the sobering recognition that He is not to be trifled with.

Consider three truths about fearing God that might help you see why He ought to be loved and feared at the same time:

1. Fearing God is not only an Old Testament idea. It is a foundational and indispensable characteristic of the Christian life.

Peter instructs believers to "conduct [themselves] *in fear* during the time of [their] stay on earth" (1 Pet. 1:17, emphasis added). Paul writes to the Corinthians, instructing them to "cleanse [themselves] from all defilement of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness *in the fear of God*" (2 Cor. 7:1, emphasis added). The writer of Hebrews implores believers to "offer to God an acceptable service *with reverence and awe*. For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28-29, emphasis added). Even Jesus warned His followers not to fear those who can only kill the body, but rather to "fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!" (Luke 12:4-5). *As a Christian, if your love for God does not co-exist with a reverent fear of Him, you are walking in disobedience.*

2. The fear of God brings temporal and eternal benefits.

"The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant" (Ps. 25:14). "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them" (Ps. 34:7). "The Lord has compassion on those who fear Him" (Ps. 103:13). "The Lord favors those who fear Him" (Ps. 147:11). "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). "The fear of the Lord prolongs life" (Prov. 10:27). "The fear of the Lord leads to life, that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil" (Prov. 19:23). "The reward of humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, honor and life" (Prov. 22:4). As David says to the Lord, "How great is Your goodness, which You have stored up for those who fear You" (Ps. 31:19). *Clearly, fearing God is to your great advantage.*

3. A biblically informed fear of God is *only* characteristic of those who are being saved, and foreign to all who are perishing.

In Romans 3, Paul ends his list of reasons why the ungodly are condemned by saying, "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (v. 18). The writer of Proverbs informs us that the wicked will be destroyed "because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord" (Prov. 1:29). The fact is, the man who lives happily now and will experience joy for eternity is the one who fears God. The person who has no fear of God does not know Him and will gain nothing from Him. *In reality, the person who does not fear God does not truly love Him.*

4. The fear of God drives the believer away from sin.

Consider a few passages where this is clearly stated: "Fear the Lord *and turn away from evil*" (Prov. 3:7, emphasis added). "The fear of the Lord *is to hate evil*" (Prov. 8:13, emphasis added). "By the fear of the Lord *one keeps away from evil*" (Prov. 16:6, emphasis added). "Fear God *and keep His commandments*" (Ecc. 12:13, NKJV, emphasis added). These verses leave no doubt that one central aspect of *fearing God is obeying God*. With all of this in mind, it is evident that the man who turns *toward* evil in whatever form is not turning *away from* evil in the fear of God. When we compare these passages with Jesus words in John 14:15—"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments"—we see clearly that love for God and fear God are perfectly compatible. *In order to be purified from your sin, in other words, you must not only love God, but you must fear Him also.*

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¹ D. A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 11.