

Fear of the Lord

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Date: 14 May 2017

Preacher: Tom Muir

[0:00] So we're gonna be in Proverbs chapter 1 and 2, mainly, although I want to use quite a lot of different texts if you like tonight. This is a topic in one sense, topical sermon, and so we seek to cover this topic by looking at different parts of scripture as well.

I want to start by saying this. Depending on the newspaper you read or the media that you engage with, whatever you read or watch or look at out there, you may be aware that there is a new humanity under construction.

I don't know how much a part of this new humanity you feel, or whether you're even aware of it, but it's a new humanity that is being built by our newly liberated society that is free from the shackles of the old restraints, the old ways, the old religion, the old conformity, if you like.

And it means that we get to make of ourselves what we will. And it's expressed in many different ways throughout our society, quite subtly or very overtly.

And it's something that a lot of people are very happy about. It's expressed, I think, in one line by an actress, Emma Watson, who I want to just quote for a minute. She was picking up an award for a gender neutral...

[1:21] She'd want to film an award, it was a gender neutral award. And I don't mention her to pick on her at all, whatever. But she's a public figure who makes public pronouncements, so we're just engaging with what she says at that level.

And she says something very interesting. She said this, accepting her award and saying thank you very much, very politely. She said, the first acting award in history that doesn't separate nominees based on their sex says something about how we perceive the human experience.

And as that last few words says something about how we perceive the human experience, and that's the point. That's where people are happy to get to nowadays, is that we get to perceive what it means to be human.

You and I, as part of society, get to say what we feel about our own identity. We get to construct our own image however we see fit.

And of course that plays out in many different ways, and I'm sure you're aware of the ways in which that plays out in our society, but it's a, it's a, it feels like a classic outworking of a life dilemma, an existential dilemma, which is this.

[2:32] Do we first of all come into being and then get to decide who we are? Or is who we are set, first of all? And the point is that many folk nowadays would say, well, we just come into being and then it's up to us to decide exactly who we are, how we want to be referred to, how we want to identify, and how we want to conduct ourselves.

Okay? Now, with that as the background, you may feel that's something that you're kind of wrestling through at the moment. It impacts you quite a lot, a lot of your friends talk about this. You may feel like, what's this guy talking about?

I don't have anything to do with that. Not interesting, but I think you can at least identify with the point that lies underneath this new expression if you like, this desire to create a newly liberated humanity.

And that is that we get to determine who we are. It's autonomy, freedom as humans to decide who we are, how we get to behave, no thank you God. That's the point.

It's been expressed in many, many different ways over many, many different years, and we're seeing one particular expression of it nowadays. But why I mention all that is because then you come to God's word and you open it up in Proverbs, and you read these words.

[3:47] The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Now, if you've been here for the last little while, we've been thinking about wisdom and folly and how these things play out as the way to live, the way to find what is the good life, the way to follow God's ways and to know true knowledge and wisdom.

And so in other words, what the Bible says is the starting point for that, for the best way of life, is the fear of the Lord. Now, that's like a heresy in certain circles, in this new humanity, if you like, to talk about the fear of the Lord is an archaic term.

It's something that we've done away with. We don't need that anymore, and frankly, we'd rather not go back there again. And maybe it's something that you feel tonight. We start talking about the fear of the Lord.

No thank you very much. This is no God that I want to have anything to do if I have to fear Him. So all I want to do tonight is just to look at two things.

First of all, what is the fear of the Lord? What is it? The Bible speaks about the fear of the Lord. What does it mean? And then secondly, to come to focus as we finish on the Lord that we fear.

[5:00] Who is God and what is it about Him that we should fear Him? Okay, so those two things. And as we go through, I want to refer, as I said, to this passage, to other passages, but also often to be bringing in what the New Testament says, because I think as well, a lot of people feel or fear that this is an Old Testament concept.

To speak about fear in any way is something that was from an old time. Nowadays, Jesus certainly wouldn't be keen to talk about this, and the way in the church shouldn't be either. So I want to see what the New Testament has to say about this also.

Okay, first thing then. What is the fear of the Lord? What does the Bible mean when we read? What does Proverbs mean when it speaks about the fear of the Lord? Well, I read one writer who summarized it helpfully, and I'm just going to use his definition.

He says this, okay? So the fear of the Lord, what do we mean? We don't just mean an emotion. So, you know, the fear of the Lord means that Christians are frequently found cowering in corners, sweating fear of terror, because something might happen to them.

He says the fear of the Lord in its fullness is expressed in living in submissive obedience to the revealed ethics and authority of God the Creator.

[6:16] So there's a lot in that, isn't there? It recognizes, first of all, that there is a God who is the Creator. So our society says, no, thank you. We've done away with God. We say, no, we maintain that there is a God who is the Creator who is revealed in the pages of the Bible, and he is our starting point, if you like.

He's our reference point. And he has revealed to us ways in which he wants us to live as our Creator. And the fear of the Lord is to recognize his authority and so to live out our lives with that as our primary reference point.

So, again, those words may give you the shivers, submissive obedience to the will of God. But that's what we're talking about tonight.

The Lord says that to submissively obey, to seek to live out your lives under the Lordship, under the authority of God, is your calling as a human being.

And it is the best thing for you also. So I want to recognize those two things as we go through tonight. You see that, the verses that we've read, okay? So we see this now.

[7:21] Obviously there's a lot of personification going on here in terms of wisdom and folly, but we pick up on this kind of language. So we go to verse 23. Verse 22, the simple ones have been called out, if you like, and the word to them there is, well, how long are you going to go on being simple, shunning God's ways?

And then we get in verse 23, if you turn my reproof, my correction, if you turn at my reproof. So the thing about reproof is it exists where transgression exists.

So in other words, there's no reproof without somebody needing corrected. And correction or transgression occurs where boundaries exist. That's kind of self-evident, isn't it?

Nobody has any right to say you should change your ways if there are no set boundaries to how we should live. So Proverbs is operating within the context of set boundaries for how that we should live.

If you turn at my reproof, and lay your hand if I was to go back down to verse 29, speaks to those who haven't listened because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel and despise all my reproof.

[8:42] So there again, people are being addressed, who's chosen in their lives to ignore correction, to ignore the ways of God. And again, they're called out. They're spoken to very clearly.

And there's no mistaking here the way that they're spoken to. So correction. There is a way that you should live, and it is outlined very clearly in this passage.

Wisdom, then, the fear of the Lord is identifying a correct starting point for the way that we are to live our lives. It's recognizing, first of all, how should I, if you like, set my compass?

Well, it's to recognize, first of all, that there is one who has made me, who has clearly explained to me how he wants me to live, and that is the framework in which I operate. So think about highway code.

So if you drive, or if you cycle, actually, you need to know how you should behave when you drive or when you cycle. If you decided to start driving by just getting in a car and going for it, you might have fun.

[9:51] You probably won't have fun. Probably everybody else on the road won't have fun. And you may well get into trouble with the law. You can't just get into a car and go, can you? You need the starting point.

You need to know that there are certain ways in which you're to operate so that you can navigate the road safely. But here's the thing about that as a starting point. You don't learn the highway code. Pass your test and say, fantastic, I am now liberated from the highway code because I know everything.

So you can just carry on however you feel like you take the starting point with you in theory. So you take that code with you as you drive all the days of your life, of course, so that you drive safely.

And so it is with the fear of the Lord. It is that starting point where you recognize who he is, his authority, and majesty. And you take that with you in every decision, in every aspect of who you are as a created being, in your morality and in your ethics, in the cultural awareness that you have, in your conversations, everything.

The fear of the Lord is to recognize his primacy and to operate accordingly. I want to give you an example from Job. Job is a very clear example of somebody who feared the Lord.

[11:08] He's often spoken of as a righteous man, somebody whose life he's not described as a perfect man, because nobody except the Lord Jesus was that, but he's somebody who oriented his life around as much, often as we read as much as possible, around following God's will.

So Job's introduced to us in chapter one of that book, and I'm just going to read a few verses. It talks about his sons. So he had some boys, and they were fond of having a good time.

So his sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all.

For Job said, it may be that my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts. Thus Job did continually. You see what Job is doing there? He lived in very different times to you and I, the way he expressed.

If you like, his faith was different in the sense that he would go and offer burnt offerings, but he was deeply concerned that he and his family lived within the orbit, if you like, of the will of God.

[12:23] It was his abiding passion that he and his family would live within the will of God. It was something that was his starting point, and it went with him into all of his life.

So the fear of the Lord is to recognize his ways and to live accordingly. Let's say a few things about that just as we start to work it through and apply it.

And the first is this, I've referenced this already. I think many people hear this kind of thing and think, well, this sounds like, you're talking about works, salvation by works, and I think we're beyond all of this kind of stuff now, talking about behavior, ethics, how we should live.

These are the days of grace. Jesus is my Savior, and I am free. So we maintain, absolutely, that we are saved only by grace and not by works.

And we live in the age of grace where we know the grace of the gospel and the work of God towards us. And yet that gospel, that salvation that we have because of the work of Jesus Christ and only because of the work of Jesus Christ then motivates us to new life, to a new appreciation of the wonder of living for God and of following out His commands.

[13:41] So let me give a new testament illustration of this. Just briefly, I'm going to turn, I apologize, I should have had these verses on the screen, but I didn't. Ephesians chapter 5, speaking to Christians who know the wonder of the gospel of Jesus, and these words are impressed upon them.

And these words are impressed upon you and I as a Christian community tonight. At one time you were darkness, now you are light in the Lord.

Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true, and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

You hear that? So discern what is pleasing to the Lord. And what hope did all those years ago? You get up each day and you say, God, help me to live as you would have me live, and help me to find delight in living in the way that you would have me live, because I remember your grace towards me in your son Jesus Christ.

Second thing I want to say about this, it remains a key thing for you and I that we seek to follow and to live out God's ethic, if you like. Second thing is because it is the best.

[15:03] It's the best way to live. God's words to us, God's commands, is for our good. He is not just trying to kind of control us, manipulate us, move us in certain directions because it amuses him.

He's not trying to spoil our fun. That's a temptation that you and I can fall into at times when his will crosses our will. He is the good God. He is Father, Son, Spirit who's existed from all time in perfect harmony, and he knows how to live.

And so the ethic of God is the best ethic, and sometimes I think, I, and you, need to recapture that. And remember again, the beauty and the joy of living God's way, living God's ethic.

If I could move, we read into chapter 2 in Proverbs, so if I can just move into chapter 2 and bring out a few words that show us that. Let me just read through these verses again with you. Let's just see what they say about the beauty, the goodness of living under the feet of the Lord, living out this wisdom.

These things are so interrelated, aren't they, as we go through this book. So from chapter 2, verse 6, for the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding, he stores up sound to wisdom for the upright, he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice, and watching over the way of his saints.

[16:34] Then you will understand righteousness and justice. So that's something that he says to you, if you walk in my ways, you will understand righteousness and justice, something that we often struggle to attain from within ourselves, don't we, and we have a sense of rightness and justice.

And equity, every good path for wisdom will come into your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will watch over you. That word discretion there is so important.

The mark of interesting character, we often say now is a sense of carefree-ness or just going with the flow. This speaks about discretion, watching your ways and matching what you do according to the will of God.

That's so much what the book of Proverbs is about. Take careful thought to how you live. And so these things are promised to you as you walk in the ways of God, as you fear the Lord and live that out, then this is the fruit that you will see in your life.

Now, of course, as we live, spirit indwelt as he enables us, counsels us and teaches us, leading us into a fuller knowledge of Jesus and the way that we should live.

[17:49] So it's the best, if you like. It's the best way. It's sweet. One more New Testament reference just to emphasize this in Philippians chapter 4.

Just as Paul is concluding his letter, he says these words, finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there's anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

You see that? You see what he's saying? Spend your lives meditating on God and God's ways and all that is good. All of these things are good.

They are wholesome, if you like, so that I think sometimes that word gets degraded by us a little bit. It's kind of boring to be wholesome, not very edgy.

And God says, there's a really naive way to approach your life. See the fullness of what it means and the beauty of what it means to live out the ethic of God in this age of grace.

[19:02] And the thing just to close this section, I want to say, is just to pick up on another verse from Proverbs, a few chapters later. So this encouragement to live out the feet of the Lord, this ethic, remains primary for you and I to give honor to God and to be pleasing to him.

It's the best way to live, and that is expressed, I would say, finally, in a verse from Proverbs, chapter 14. So let me quote one more verse. Proverbs, chapter 14, verse 14 says this, the backslider in heart will be filled with the fruit of his ways, and the good man will be filled with the fruit of his ways.

It's one of these wonderful verses that sort of seems to take two situations and say the same thing. So the backslider, the person who's starting to ignore God and saying, no, thank you, let me replace you with something else.

Well, that person will be filled with the fruit of his or her ways. What does that mean? Well, it means they'll get what they're after. It means that if you and I start to replace God with something else, no thank you, God, I don't like your wisdom, no thank you, God, I don't like your authority.

Let me find my own identity and live out my identity, however I feel, well, that's what you'll get. But that's all you'll get. And you'll not know the way of the Lord.

[20:28] Unless you don't get that, of course, and that's the problem, isn't it? So often people are tempted to go off on another path because they see something that looks better, but it's unattainable and it's out of our grasp because you and I don't have the capacity within ourselves to get it.

We're not able to, or it's not for us. It eludes us. And then we feel only a sense of disappointment with the way that life is turning out.

But then the verse, of course, says, a good man will be filled with the fruit of his ways. Now, just think about that for a minute. The good man, the righteous man, the way the person that is personified here, the one who seeks the Lord will be filled with the fruit of his ways.

What does that mean? Will he be filled with the righteousness? We are, of course, gifted righteousness in Jesus Christ, but we'll be filled and filled again with a sense of God's goodness and what it means to live for him and will be filled with God himself.

That is what you get as it were, go after God. Again, be reminded of that. Be reminded of what it means to seek the Lord.

[21:39] You get the Lord. You come into fellowship with him. What could be better than that? So if we start to lose a sense of the goodness of that, then we know, I think, that we've gone off the path at some point, or at least we're starting to go off the path, and we need to go back to the Lord and say, Lord, help me to see again the goodness of your ways and help me to see again your goodness.

May I desire you. That's the call so often of the Psalms, isn't it, Lord? Help me to desire you, to see you for who you are. Okay, so this is something about what it means to live out the fear of the Lord.

What is it to fear the Lord? It's to continue to live, recognizing him as the one who is the authority, and who provides the best ethic, the best way for us to live.

But secondly, I just want to ask, can I reverse the question if you like? Who is the Lord that you fear? Let's turn the focus for a minute and focus on the Lord himself.

Why should we fear him? Who is he that we should fear him? What does it look like to fear him? Proverbs is very helpful because it reminds us, as do the whole Scriptures, that the God who we are to fear, the God who gives wisdom and who is wisdom, is personal.

[23:06] Now, you think, okay, tell me something I don't know. But think about the alternative to that. Think about the alternative to that, that we just exist in a universe with no God or a force, a blind force that we can't fathom.

But Proverbs says we have a God who reveals himself and who makes it clear to us how he would have us live. He has spoken.

He has revealed himself. He has come near, if you like. So we have a God who is personal. Donald MacLeod says this, it's only because the wrath, if you like the judgment of God, is personal that mercy and forgiveness are possible.

He goes on to say, if he corrects his children, it's for their own good. If he judges it is inequity. His anger, like all his dealings with men, is covenantal. In other words, it's according to the promise that he has laid down.

It's not random. It doesn't depend on the day of the week. He's made his stipulations plain and left men and women in no doubt as to the consequences of defiance.

[24:16] That's really important. God is personal. He has come near and he's made it clear to us how we should live. And the first way in which we see him is as the holy, other, transcendent, perfect God who will judge.

He is the God who will judge the living and the dead. All people will one day face a reckoning, if you like. And we never depart from that reality. We never depart from that truth.

And so we see that. We've read these verses already, but at the end of verse, the end of chapter 1, those who despise the fear of the Lord, what happens? They'll eat the fruit of their way, have their fill of their own devices, for the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them.

Proverbs speaks clearly about the fate of those who reject the wisdom of God. God is the holy God. He is the judge who will judge all people.

Now you think, again, that this is an inappropriate talk in today's day, and Jesus would have nothing to do with this. Hear these words that Jesus spoke.

[25:29] Jesus says, do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body and hell.

So Jesus says, get that very clear. Be very aware of the fact that the Lord is the one who will judge, who knows all people's hearts, and who will hold all people accountable for the way that they will live.

That's the reality that we read consistently throughout the Bible about God, that he is the one, he is holy. He is the one who will judge.

We devalue that, again, sometimes, don't we? Or we want to put it away. We want to think of God in other terms. Sometimes you may have watched films where you have a character, a kind of Godfather kind of character who's scary.

Everybody's scared of him or her. And everybody tiptoes around this character, and they have this kind of brusque exterior. Except, maybe like their granddaughter or somebody.

[26:38] You know somebody who they've got a soft spot for? And that granddaughter can do no wrong. The granddaughter can kind of monkey around doing whatever she or he or grandson feels like.

And this kind of terrifying individual who everybody's scared of just kind of turns a blind eye because that child is the apple of their eye. And like I said, they can do no wrong.

Please don't think about God in kind of those terms. Well, I'm a Christian. He loves me. So he'll just turn a blind eye, you know? However I do, whatever I get up to, I'm sure he'll not mind too much.

When we think about God in these kind of terms, we really devalue who he is because what we say is that, well, he likes us because of what we've done, because of some characteristic within ourselves. We also devalue the fact that God took sin so seriously that he sent his son, who paid the penalty, for our sin so that we may know him and no relationship with him again.

And so we have a very, we live with a very clear sense of the reality of the holiness of God, the fact that he will judge and that he has already dealt with sin for us in his son Jesus.

[27 : 56] And so there's an awesomeness to God. There's an awesomeness when we continue to remember what he has done and what his son has done when he paid the penalty for our sins.

But what that does, when we understand this side of it also, is we understand the incredible mercy of God. Who is the Lord that we should fear him? Well, he's the Holy One, he's the righteous One who will judge the world, and he's the merciful one, a bounding in love.

Psalms 103, we've sung a couple of times in the Psalms already tonight, and I hope you recognize that while we sang these Psalms. Let me read from Psalm 133. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

So to live in the fear of the Lord is to know him in his holiness and to know him according to his covenant love, where he says, if you abide in the way that I would have you abide, and as we approach him nowadays according to his terms, through his son Jesus, then we are welcomed with open arms into a relationship with him where we know his forgiveness and his grace and his presence, and we're promised that for all eternity.

Because of his great love, he desired to call a people to himself, that he may know them, he may know you, and that you may know him, in his mercy and in his goodness, in his perfection.

[29 : 29] And you know something of the love of God. And so then we understand that God's love again as a person isn't the kind of... Sorry, God's mercy and his wrath or sin isn't the kind of wrath that is random.

It isn't that he delights in inflicting pain on people. And so we don't fear him by just cowering in a corner in case something happens to us.

People will often use this kind of description of somebody, a kind of psychopathic person who loves to inflict pain. That's, I think, where somebody like Stephen Fry gets God very wrong because he sees God as an unreasonable character who just randomly inflicts bad things on people.

But God deals with this according to the ways of his covenant. He lays down how he would have us live. He calls us to follow him. He calls us into relationship with him by Jesus Christ.

And then he showers his grace and his love and his mercy on you as you know him and as you live for him. So let's finish.

[30 : 41] Many would say that to talk about the fear of the Lord is a retrogressive step and we should go nowhere near it. Let's be done with this kind of talk.

We're far too enlightened for this kind of stuff. Rather, let's see the fear of the Lord, the consistent picture of what the Bible says about the fear of the Lord.

And let's recapture that sense of what it means to have a view of the awesomeness of God and the holiness of God and the beauty, the wonder and the goodness of being called by God into a life living under his wisdom and his guidance and his rule and the blessedness, the goodness of what that looks like.

The goodness of what that looks like. As you and I live that out individually and in our family units and in our church unit encouraging one another and building one another up so that we can be supported in living out this life, life of fearing the Lord.

And it's hard, isn't it? We find it hard and we're challenged by this. So I'm going to finish by just reading a few verses from another Psalm, Psalm 119. And as I read this, just listen to the way in which the psalmist speaks about his desire to cherish the ways of God.

[32 : 04] If we can finish with these words, let's make these words our prayer. So Psalm 119, I'm going to read from verse 33. Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes and I'll keep it to the end.

Give me understanding that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments for I delight in it. Incline my heart to your testimonies and not to selfish gain.

Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things. Give me life in your ways. Confirm to your servant your promise that you may be feared. Turn away the reproach that I dread for your rules are good.

Behold, I long for your precepts. In your righteousness give me life. Let me pray.

Holy God, we plead with you that you would give us, by your spirit of working us, a renewed sense of vision of who you are.

[33:08] You are the mighty one, the holy one, the eternal one. You are consistent and you have consistently revealed yourself to us. You deal with us consistently according to the ways in which you have revealed that we should live.

And yet you have also dealt with us in great mercy. We thank you for the righteousness of Jesus. We thank you for the sacrifice of Jesus.

We thank you that we can come to you in those terms. That you have saved us when it wasn't possible for us to save ourselves. But we pray that seeing that Lord, we would then love and delight to live according to your ways.

Give us as a church a picture of what it looks like to be a community of changed people, glorifying God, living out the gospel and living out your ethic, your ways for us.

Help us with this. We find it so difficult so very often. And may your spirit be at work amongst us to confirm these things to us and to support us as we seek to do this.

[34:19] Amen.