

## **Love and fear; two sides of the same coin?**

Readings: Deuteronomy 4:9 - 14, 1 John 3:1 – 6

Over the holidays you have been considering questions asked by church members. I've been delighted that you have so many. We won't be able to address them all in January but I have kept them in mind to be raised as part of other topics during the year.

We don't like to feel afraid do we? Who can remember as a child, lying awake at night, certain there was a monster under the bed, waiting to get you? Or being in Christchurch during the earthquakes; feeling terrified that the next one would be another huge shock with terrible consequences?

Mostly we learn to overcome those fears. As children, we leave a nightlight on. As adults, we face the fears full on or we avoid the circumstances that generate fear. Fear isn't usually pleasant so we avoid it like crazy. But try as we might, it doesn't go away so easily.

*There are only two feelings.*

*Love and fear.*

*There are only two languages.*

*Love and fear.*

*There are only two activities.*

*Love and fear.*

*There are only two motives,  
two procedures, two frameworks,  
two results.*

*Love and fear.*

*Love and fear.* Michael Leunig

What do you think about love and fear? Is fear ever healthy? Turn to your neighbour and share your thoughts.....

I wonder if you, like me, have difficulty seeing how fear and love fit together, in life generally, and in the Christian life. This morning I am going to focus on how they affect how we think about God and how we relate to God.

Most of us like to talk about loving God. If we can, we avoid any mention of fearing God. We know what fear feels like and it is not good. And yet Scripture is very clear:

God says, in Deuteronomy 4:10 "Assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on the earth,

and may teach their children so” People came to the temple to worship and to hear Scripture and the Rabbi’s teachings. Those teachings gave information about God, right living and aimed to instil a sense of fear of God in the people. Let’s look at some more Scriptures –

Ps 19:9        *...the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.*

Proverbs 1:7 *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Some of you will be thinking “But they are all Old Testament passages. Jesus came to wipe out fear.” You will quote 1 John 4:18 *Perfect love casts out fear*” as evidence. I will get to that later.

First let’s look a bit deeper at the nature of fear and love.

According to the Oxford dictionary the noun ‘fear’ is an unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain, or harm.

The Hebrew understanding of fear is very interesting. The root word is *yirah*. יִרָאָה! This fear can mean fear of danger or pain, but it also means awe or reverence.

When we think about fear in the sense of being God-fearing, we include the ideas of awe, amazement, astonishment, wonder, amazement, mystery – worship even. That is the kind of fear referred to in our reading from Exodus.

According to Jewish tradition there are three types of *yirah*<sup>1</sup>:

1. The fear of punishment or unpleasant consequences. A common fear in this category is that of rejection; especially rejection by people we care about.

We view God as someone who only loves us when we do everything right. Have we prayed enough or visited enough people or been grateful enough? We believe God will love us if we have done the right things in the right way. If we haven’t; he won’t. When we stop and think about this logically, we know it is rubbish. But deep down, many of us struggle to believe that God really loves us regardless of our attitudes and behaviour. If we had a distant, uncaring or violent parent, this will be true for you on some level. I know I can feel like this about God if I give in to it.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Scripture/Parashah/Summaries/Eikev/Yirah/yirah.html>

2. The second type of fear involves anxiety over breaking God's laws. If we don't do what is right, God will not only reject us but he will punish us. That's Karma. What goes around comes around. You reap what you sow.

Of course there is some truth in this. Kindness begets kindness, and unkindness only produces bad results. But that is about consequences; it is not the same as punishment from God.

3. The third type of fear comes from reverence generated by seeing things rightly. It's about having a clear and correct view of God and God's creation. This kind of fear is associated with an awareness of God all around us. It means we recognise the majesty of God even if in a limited way. It also brings the ability to commune and have fellowship with the Holy Spirit. This is a very healthy fear to have.

Now let's have a look at love. Again I've gone to the Oxford Dictionary: Love is a strong feeling of affection, or sometimes sexual attraction. Love (as a noun) is also an interest or pleasure in something. Probably most of us think we understand love. But, the danger in thinking of love as an emotion or feeling, is feelings come and go. Biblical love is not a feeling, rather it is a command, we obey and an action we take, regardless of how we feel about a person or circumstance.

Let's head back to 1 Jn 4:18 which seems to say that love is good and fear is not. *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; ....* Listen carefully to the second half of the verse: *for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.*

*"Fear has to do with punishment."* This is where the New Testament brings clarity to love and fear. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we need have no fear of punishment. We certainly deserve punishment. We will always fail. But God loves us so much that Jesus came to take away our punishment. So we don't need to fear punishment or any lack of approval, from God because Jesus has taken all of that for us. When God looks at us, he sees what Jesus has done and he is full of love for us.

Christianity is the only love based religion. Every other religion depends on the works of the one who wants to experience salvation. Muslims must obey the five pillars of Islam. Buddhists reach Nirvana by following the Noble Eightfold Path - which includes heroically working to eliminate evil from your life. Jehovah's Witnesses must work hard to reach a heaven that can only hold 144,000 people.

Only Christians simply trust in what someone else has done for us.

The NRSV puts the third part of the verse like this: *“If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.”* If we are afraid of punishment, we don’t know in our heart of hearts how much he truly loves us. We are still trying to earn his love.

Listen to another John, John Lennon: *“When we are afraid, we pull back from life. When we are in love, we open to all that life has to offer with passion, excitement, and acceptance. We need to learn to love ourselves first, in all our glory and our imperfections. If we cannot love ourselves, we cannot fully open to our ability to love others or our potential to create. Evolution, and all hopes for a better world, rest in the fearlessness and open-hearted vision of people who embrace life.”*

John Lennon

Lennon says we need to flee fear. That’s true for unhealthy fear – fear that overwhelms and restricts us. But we must not flee the deep reverence and trembling that lead us closer to God. We must not flee the awe and amazement that allow us to see ourselves as God see’s us. Embracing life involves regarding God with both a holy fear and with a deep love that he generates within us.

Obviously not all fear is bad. It is a healthy survival mechanism that keeps us from unnecessary harm; from doing stupid things. Fear is our friend in just the right doses. It is an indicator that something is up. It can tell us there is something we need to face if we want to grow.

Too much fear can prevent us from taking risks – being creative or expressing or extending ourselves in any way. It can paralyse us. It can stifle our God-given dreams. It can keep us small. We can become people pleasers, risk-avoiders, we lose our creativity and follow whatever we think is the norm.

In its place, fear is a good thing. Oswald Chambers said “The remarkable thing about God is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.” Healthy fear leads us into a good relationship with the living God and with others.

Deuteronomy 10:12 – 13

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God; to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.

Let’s pray:

Living God, give us the kind of fear that sees your deep love for us and for all of your creation. Create in us a reverence and awe for who you are and for the price your

dear Son paid on the cross. Give us a sense of awe as we see you at work in your world today. Let us see how pleased you are when we take healthy risks towards becoming the people you want us to be. You are amazing and you do amazing things. Amen