

Even the Hairs of My Head Are All Numbered

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon encourages believers to overcome fear through faith in God's promises and His intimate care for them.

Scripture: Matthew 7:11, Matthew 10:24, Matthew 10:26, Matthew 10:28-29, Luke 14:26

Topics: "Gods Sovereignty", "Overcoming Fear"

Description

John Piper reflects on his first year in the pastorate, expressing feelings of weakness and inadequacy, yet acknowledging God's mercy and power to help in times of need. He confesses his struggle with fear and pride, emphasizing the importance of trusting in God's promises and sufficiency. Through the text in Matthew 10:24-33, Piper encourages himself and his congregation to overcome fear by focusing on Jesus' teachings and promises, highlighting the need to have a proper fear of God rather than man, and to trust in God's care and sovereignty over their lives.

Transcript

Reflections on My First Year in the Pastorate

July 12, 1981

Matthew 10:24-33

On this Sunday one year ago I preached my first sermon as pastor of Bethlehem. And now looking back on one year in the pastorate I feel two main emotions: 1) a sense of weakness and inadequacy to fulfill this very high and holy calling and 2) a sense of God's great mercy and power to help in time of need, namely always. The first emotion is often a mingling of guilt and fear--guilt that I have done something harmful or left something good undone, and fear that tomorrow's crisis or pressure may be too complex or too heavy to bear. The second emotion is a humbling gratitude to Christ whose strength is made perfect in our weakness. I say it is a humbling gratitude because it has been my experience that my pride is most thoroughly broken when, at the end of my resources God meets my need. Most of my tears in this first year have not been shed in the moments of tragedy but in the moments of victory. Again and again I have entered situations afraid, and God has rebuked me with mercy. And I have been abased for my unbelief. Those are strange tears: joy, gratitude, sorrow and repentance all in one.

I can't understand with any empathy or appreciation what goes on inside a person who says that when he sees the cross of Christ and experiences God's power, he feels a sense of worthiness. My experience is exactly the opposite: when I catch a glimpse of Calvary-love, my first feeling is not, "My, how worthy I must be that he would die for me!" but rather, "O how foul must be my sin to require such a sacrifice, and how horribly lukewarm is my love and adoration and trust and obedience to such a worthy Savior!" And it's the same when this mercy, purchased at Calvary, meets my need in some crisis situation: I don't come away feeling worthy or sufficient; I feel broken and abased that in spite of my fears and halfhearted trust he condescends in free mercy to my need.

Those are my main emotional responses after a year in the pastorate: fear because of my own insufficiency, and gratitude because of God's merciful sufficiency. You must understand this as a confession of sin and a confession of faith. I do believe that God is merciful, that I am one of his elect children and that he will cause his power to be magnified in my weaknesses. But I also know that most of my fear is sin. It goes against the command of God because it does not come from faith in his promises. It comes from unbelief.

For example, the telephone is a wonderful invention for ministry. I can be in touch with almost any of our 800 members in one minute. For over 1800 years no pastor in the world could do that. I can make plans in minutes and break plans in minutes; I can get counsel and advice from any of dozens of sources. But there is some troublesome emotional fallout from the telephone. Not only is the flock more easily accessible; so is the shepherd. It is easy to become paranoid about a ringing telephone. Almost every time my phone rings at home I get a knot in my stomach. The reason is fear--fear that there may be a question I can't answer, an emotional problem I can't alleviate, a crisis I can't handle or anything at all that may keep me from finishing my sermon by Sunday morning. And you know what that is a sign of? Pride and unbelief. Pride, because of fear that some weakness might be exposed, unbelief because I am not resting in God's promised sufficiency.

This is just a little example of how the battle has shaped up over the past year for me. It is not a unique battle at all. It is the same one you fight every day--the battle to take God at his word and rest in his all-sufficiency and do what he commands without wavering in fear. Since the battle is not unique to me I hope you will allow me to preach a sermon to myself this morning, which will help me overcome the sin of fear by strengthening my heart in the gracious words of Jesus. You listen too. There is something for all whenever Jesus speaks.

The text is Matthew 10:24-33.

A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master; it is enough for a disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered proclaim upon the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows. So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in

heaven.

The main point of the text is that Jesus' disciples should not fear anything but the wrath of God who can destroy soul and body in hell. You can see that fearlessness is the main point because it is repeated three times and everything else is argument for why we should not fear. First in verse 26: "So have no fear of them." Second in verse 28: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." Third in verse 31: "Fear not." So what Jesus is trying to do with these words is fortify the hearts of his disciples against fear. He is trying to help me have his peace as pastor of this church; he is trying to make me bold amid opposition; he wants me to be free from anxiety so I can answer the phone in love, with a genuine concern for others instead of myself. And the way Jesus aims to accomplish all this in my heart is by his word: by telling me some truth about God that, if I believe it, will liberate me for fearless, authentic, loving life in the service of the church. Jesus argues for fearlessness. He reasons with us. He wants to change the emotions of our heart, but the pathway of his transforming power leads through the mind. One year in the pastorate has confirmed my experience of many years: it is the Word of the Lord that changes people most deeply. On the wings of the Holy Spirit the Word has power to create sons of Abraham out of stones, and to overcome fear in a wavering pastor. I would count it the highest privilege God could give me if he were to enable me to preach this Word with ever greater understanding and conviction and power for the rest of my life.

There are at least four reasons Jesus gives in this text for why I as a pastor and you as lay-ministers should not be fearful. Let's listen to these and pray that the very hearing will create the peace and boldness Jesus wants. Notice in verse 26 that the command, "have no fear of them," is preceded by a "so" or a "therefore" and is followed by a "for" or "because." This means that a reason not to be fearful precedes the command to have no fear, and another reason follows the command. Let's look at these one at a time.

Verse 25 says, "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household." Why would Jesus follow this with "therefore have no fear of them." We might expect him to say, "Nevertheless, have no fear of them." But he doesn't. The argument seems to be something like this: if in your effort to be like Christ as his disciple and slave you are met with ill will, do not jump to the fearful conclusion that you have failed and God is punishing you. On the contrary, if Christ met with ill will, it is to be fully expected that his disciples and servants will too. So be encouraged, your trouble is a mark of Christ-likeness. It is a great help in overcoming fear when the master of your life tells you ahead of time that trouble is coming and that it's not necessarily your fault. This helps us meet opposition as a matter of normal Christian ministry. It takes at least one of the stingers out of insult and slander if you can respond without surprise or alarm.

Peter wrote to the Christians of Asia Minor, "Beloved do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:12f). One of the elements of fear is the encountering of something unexpected. It takes us off guard, pushes us off balance and creates the sensation that things are out of control and that aimless absurdity reigns. Jesus sweeps all this away by telling us ahead of time very matter-of-factly that if we try to be like our teacher and like our master we will be mistreated. We need not be taken off guard or lose our emotional balance; things are not absurd; they are quite under control--all foreseen and predicted by the Lord. Therefore we should not fear. On the contrary it is comforting to see signs that we are part of Jesus' household. How can you fear if you have Jesus as the Lord of your house?

That's Jesus' first argument why we should not fear what people might do to us. His second argument follows the command in verse 26: "Have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." One of the things that makes being slandered so fearful is the thought that the slanderers may be able to convince everyone of their lie. It would be a frightening thing to think that those who call Jesus Beelzebul and who malign us as fools or devils would be so persuasive that the truth is never known. A significant element in the fear of being wronged is the thought that the wrong may never be righted and the truth will never be out. But Jesus assures the disciples, he assures me as pastor, that the truth now concealed will one day be revealed. Every evil word spoken against the sons of God will be brought to light and they will be exonerated. Someday it will be manifest to all mankind that Jesus is not Beelzebul and that his disciples are not fools or devils. The whole universe will be lit by the light of the glory of the children of God and the mouth of every opponent will be eternally stopped. So do not fear their words.

And the point of verse 27 is that even before that great day of revelation we should be declaring the truth about Christ and his disciples: "What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops." During Jesus' earthly ministry he kept a fairly low profile. But now he instructs his disciples to cut loose, to expose every false notion about Jesus and to placard his glories before the nations. But what is comforting in this argument is the promise Jesus gives in verse 26 that whatever evil men speak of us falsely will most surely be exposed. Therefore we need not fear that they will have the last word. God will have the last word. We can relax, endure their criticisms and threats and even have the freedom and grace to return good for evil.

The third reason Jesus gives for why we need not fear what man can do to us is found in verse 28: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." This is an amazing verse. Who today would say things like this? In the midst of trying to encourage fearlessness and comfort Jesus throws this sentence: "fear God because he can destroy soul and body in hell." Fear doing anything that would cause you to be cast away by God. How does that help us become fearless toward man? It's quite simple. The fear of man is the motive behind many sins. And Jesus wants to tell us that the penalty of those sins is much more to be feared than anything man might do to us.

Verse 33 says, "Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." And why do many people deny Jesus before men? Fear. But fear of the wrong thing. What ought to be feared is denying Jesus because if we do that Jesus will deny us and God will destroy soul and body in hell. Therefore, Jesus is indeed trying to embolden his disciples and take away their fear of men. A proper fear of God liberates us from the bondage of fearing men.

But there is another reason why verse 28 is amazing. It shows how radically other-worldly are the values Jesus lives by. We say, "O no, we could even be killed." Jesus says, "Fear not, you can only be killed!" Do you hear the way our Lord Jesus talks? Do you hear how strange and out of step with humanity he is? I get so excited when words like this begin to sink into my heart, when I begin to feel how free and how authentically different followers of Jesus can be if we share his radical values. "Don't fear! You can only be killed!"

The only way to find comfort in a sentence like that is to experience an utter revolution of what you count as most valuable. Fear is what you feel when your greatest values are threatened. So when Jesus said, "Don't be afraid, they can only kill your body, he meant, "Don't count this life with all its attachments as most valuable. Confessing my name before men is more valuable than life. Choose death before you

choose to deny me." "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). When you set out to follow Jesus you surrender earthly life as an ultimate value. And in its place you put the life of the soul in God. Eternity is far more important than time on earth. Hell is more fearful than suffering for Christ on earth. Union with God is more desirable than all the pleasures of earth. If this revolution of values has taken place in your heart by the new birth then you will understand fully and be encouraged by the words of Jesus, "Don't fear. You can only be killed."

The fourth and final argument for why we should not be afraid is found in verses 29-31. Who but Jesus (and perhaps Jonathan Edwards) would put back to back the fearfulness of God who destroys in hell, and the tenderness of God who cares for the sparrows? The argument goes like this: Sparrows are of very little value; nevertheless God concerns himself so much with their existence that not one ever dies apart from his will; you are of more value than many sparrows; therefore, God will much more concern himself with you so that nothing befalls you apart from his gracious will. The reason we know God's will for us is gracious is that he is called our Father: "Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from your Father's will" (verse 29). "If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:11). God's will for us is our good.

Then Jesus adds one other ingredient to this argument for fearlessness: namely, verse 30: "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered." God knows us minutely. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He has counted and named every hair, even though they are of little value. And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will.

So there are three things that conspire in this last argument to give us peace: 1) God knows us perfectly; 2) God governs our lives and the world minutely; 3) God cares for us with fatherly concern. How does this comfort us if the sparrow still falls and if the enemy still kills the body? It doesn't, unless that mind is in us which was also in Christ. When we have the values of Jesus we will not need to be assured even of life on this earth. It will be enough to know that our Father in Heaven loves us deeply, knows us fully, and governs us completely, and that, therefore, everything that befalls us is for our good. So don't be afraid of anything except unbelief.

There are literally dozens of things I would like to say at the end of this first year. Dozens of thank-yous to you and countless praises to God. I do not take for granted the kindness and patience shown to me in all my greenness. You are a remarkable people. The Spirit of God is in this place with sanctifying power. My great desire is to be a better pastor for the eternal good of your souls and for the glory of God. And my prayer is that I not be perted from this goal by any fear or anxiety. God help us all to trust his Word and be free.

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