

The Priority of the Fear of God

by Richard Owen Roberts

This sermon emphasizes the importance of the fear of God, highlighting its role as the beginning of wisdom, the hope of social justice, and the guarantee of personal holiness. It delves into the three levels of God's presence: essential, manifest, and cultivated, stressing the need to seek and cultivate God's presence in our lives for transformation and change in priorities.

Scripture: Proverbs 9:10, Psalm 111:10, Isaiah 11:2, Acts 3:19, 2 Chronicles 7:14, James 4:8, Psalm 139:7, Hebrews 10:22, James 4:10, 1 Peter 1:15

Topics: "Fear of God", "Cultivating God's Presence"

Description

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Transcript

A few words about the issue of priority. And I want to say to you that the view of God that now exists in the church is way below the view of God that used to exist in the church. And while I cannot speak at length about that subject, I can say to you that one of the things that the Bible is ever so clear about is the fear of God.

Now there may be more areas where this is of immense consequence, but I want to speak of three. Number one, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Number two, the fear of God is the hope of social justice.

Number three, the fear of God is our only guarantee of personal holiness. Now I don't mean to say that that covers the entirety of the Bible, but I want you to think with me on those three subjects. And as some of you have heard me say elsewhere, I was once asked to preach in the city of Wheaton in a church, and I was told that I would have three Sunday mornings in a row in the middle of the summer, and I didn't have any invitations from elsewhere for those three Sundays.

And so I prayed and said, Lord, is there something that I ought to speak of that covers three matters of great importance? And I came to what I have just said to you. Now take them, if you will, as three subjects of vast importance. Number one, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

None of us have ever lived in such an age of stupidity as today. A lot of the decisions made by those who ought to know better are so utterly stupid that even a child knows they can't work. For instance, the matter of debt.

How long, brother Mike, can a family go on being in debt? Well, we all know that it's not forever. Sooner or later, you're going to be in immense difficulty if you keep on with indebtedness. Our nation has mortgaged the future of our great-grandchildren and is adding to that debt on a weekly basis.

What a ridiculous thing to do. You cannot, whether you're a family or a nation, you cannot keep on and keep on and keep on spending money that you don't even have. And yet that's the United States, pretending that we can spend what we don't have forever and it never has any ill effect.

But one could speak of dozens of areas where gross foolishness is occurring because we know nothing of the wisdom of God, the wisdom that comes from the fear of God. Or take the second matter of which I've already spoken. I said to you earlier that the fear of God is our only real hope of social justice.

And I would like to ask you to think now, is a person who lives on the poverty line as apt to receive so called justice in this country as a person who is wealthy? Well, the truth of the matter is that a wealthy person can commit five murders and get away with it. But the person without funds can't. And there's a reason.

Our judges and others who ought to know better don't hesitate to take bribes. They can't possibly be just. They are so full of injustice themselves.

But I ask you, can a person who has within them the fear of God willfully be unjust? They may end up unjust in some fashion, but not because he deliberately chooses to be unjust. And everything that I look at says that the injustice that prevails in this country is willful. Or the third area of which I've spoken.

Now, yesterday we started, and this morning we beautifully were confronted with the issue of personal holiness. For those that achieve at least some measure of holiness, what helps most? Love of our dogs? The fact that we know how to tinker with the motor on our automobile? No, the thing that helps most is the fear of God. And some of us who are perfectly capable of sin, I suppose all of us are personally capable of sin, but we avoid it deliberately because we love the Lord.

But if you throw the Lord out, you've thrown out the avoidance of evil as well. What I'm trying to say to you, I hope is clear. Now, I mentioned that I had three Sundays in a row.

Now, if they had been in Methodist churches, it would have been one thing. But the three Sundays were in a Christian and missionary alliance church. And this is what the people said to me.

We don't believe in a God who is a God of love, who is a God to be feared. Well, frankly, a God who can send us to hell forever is to be feared, whether you believe it or not. A God who has set forth the rules of holiness is a God that can enforce those rules.

Well, that's a matter I wanted to bring in front of you, the issue of priorities. But not only did I wish to speak about the fear of God, which has been thrown out by the bulk of the church, but I also wish to speak to you about the fact that nowhere is it recorded that the Jews ever fulfilled the requirements that God laid on them. Now, I know that some of you are aware that in the book of Luke, Jesus himself going into the very synagogue that was part and parcel of his family there, made as his closing statement the—oh, I thought I

was going to say it, but you're willing to forgive an old man who messes it up—the acceptable year of the Lord.

And you've read that, and you've wondered, well, what even are the possibilities? Well, suppose that the acceptable year of the Lord was the year of Jubilee. And I wonder how many of you know that there's a marvelous record of the year of Jubilee. I think it's in Leviticus chapter 25.

And I wonder again how many of you know that the year of Jubilee, which was laid out by the Lord God Almighty, was never fulfilled. And there are perfectly good reasons. Remember, the year of Jubilee was the 50th year.

But prior to the 50th year, there were a series of years. Seven, seven, seven, seven, seven. You kept on until you reached 49.

And every seven years, all captivity of others was ended. And then on the 50th year, the 50th year which we've spoken of as the year of Jubilee, all properties were returned to their rightful owners. And do you know how many times the year of Jubilee was ever celebrated? Well, as near as I know, zero.

I don't think that people were much interested in releasing from bondage slavery, nor were they willing to lose money by returning property to its earlier owner. But our Lord Jesus Christ said that part of his duty involved the acceptable year of the Lord. So, I've used the word priority, and what I'm talking about is when we worship and serve the God that is, not the God that we imagined.

And the God that is is a just God. And the God that is is a good God. But we're neither just nor good unless enabled to become that through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Well, those are the three matters that I wish to draw pure attention. The cycles of history, the fact that there are at least three forms of sinners to be reached, and the issue of priority. First in our line of concern is not repentance.

First in our line of concern is the view of God. And it is, as I sought to say on Sunday nights, impossible to give any kind of serious consideration to repentance if you've got everything messed up in terms of the God who laid out the rules. And obviously, by the standards of the average person, there are no such things as rules.

We live in a time when you do what you please, and if somebody else doesn't like it, they can lump it. And I'm not talking to you about the way to make yourself famous and loved. I don't know how many times people have approached me and said, you're nothing but a dumb jerk.

And they've advised others that Nan Roberts is nothing but a fanatic. Pay no attention to him. And many who have said, you're nothing but a legalist.

By today's standards, if there is a God, he is as ridiculous as we are. Well, as I said, three matters, but I want to spend a few moments on the text of this conference. Repent, therefore, and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.

And as I said last night, it's very difficult to divide the last half into the two divisions of the times of refreshing and the presence of the Lord, and I haven't tried very hard to make that division. But I would like to speak to you now concerning the last half of verse 19. And I would like to help those who are confused

on this issue with the word presence.

Times are refreshing from the presence of the Lord. All of us need to have a biblical view of the meaning and significance of that term. And granted, I cannot cite a verse that you can turn to where what I'm about to say is spoken up.

And there might be somebody here who has even the notion that I've departed from the scripture in what I'm about to say. And the intention is not to teach what the scriptures plainly speak of, but what is a matter that all of us who are students of the Bible ought to understand. When we speak about the presence of God, there are at least three areas that we ought to acquaint ourselves with.

There is the essential presence of God. There is, number two, the manifest presence of God. And there is, number three, the cultivated presence of God.

Now those might be meaningless words as far as you're concerned. But you remember that what we've got here in this congregation tonight is some young people. I wonder if the oldest boy here were to be loaded on a rocket tomorrow morning and shot out into space.

How many days would it take before he was beyond the presence of God? Did you catch what I asked? How many days would he be going outward before he passed the presence of God? Three days? Five days? Twelve days? A hundred days? A thousand days? A hundred thousand days? You can't go anywhere where God is not. God fills both heavens and earth. So when we speak about the presence of God, we must clearly understand that there is a presence of God everywhere.

And now this may be offensive to you, but it is true nonetheless. God is no more present in a church than he is in a tavern when we're dealing with his essential presence. You simply cannot hide from the presence of God or go anywhere where God is not.

But it would be a ridiculous mistake to suppose that when the Bible refers to the presence of God, it is exclusively speaking of the manifest presence. Now, the application of what I've just said should be obvious to you. The essential presence of God does not transform mankind.

It is a true and a wonderful fact that it doesn't change a sinner into a saint. But as I said, there are three levels of the presence of God that we've got to face. The essential presence, as I've just said, is everywhere and does not have transforming impact.

But we can speak as well of the manifest presence of God. And all of us, young and old, ought to have an understanding of what is being spoken of when we speak of the manifest presence. Manifest, what does that really mean? Felt? Internalized? Unshakable? Transforming? Yes, all of those.

Is it not amazing that God loves you so much that he's willing to draw near? You don't have to go to heaven to experience the manifest presence of God. Some of us who have wanted to walk with the Lord have indeed been incredibly blessed on occasion when we knew God was with us in a manifest way. And when we talk about revival, what we're talking about is not the essential presence of God, but the manifest presence of God.

And when in Acts 3:19, it speaks of times of refreshing that come from the presence of the Lord, it is speaking of the manifest presence. And I'm asking you to think about the significance of what is said. When indeed a person or a people encounter the manifest presence of God, what happens? Well,

everyone who has sought to live a repentant life feels tremendously different about themselves than prior to their exposure to the manifest presence of God.

If God were truly to manifest himself here tonight, the most repentant person in the room would still feel terribly dirty and shabby. And what we're talking about this week is that when we have done the best we could in terms of repentance, and then there happens a refreshing season from the presence of the Lord, we see that what we've done is only a beginning. That God himself, because of his nearness to us, enables us to see things that otherwise we miss.

So that indeed, we can say concerning the presence of God, not only is it felt, not only is it internalized, not only is it unshakable, not only is it transforming, but it is penetrating to a degree that what was not apparent to us before by any means is suddenly very, very clear. And then I have spoken of a third category. I spoke of the essential presence and of the manifest presence, and I'm asking you now to consider the third matter of the cultivated presence.

Now, I've been told I'm supposed to stand here, but I'd like to come down and tap you on the shoulder and ask if you've ever faced personally this issue. Now look, I'll be quite frank with you. We hoped for that crowd, that this auditorium would prove much too small, and much more than that, we hoped that God would come among us in a marvelous fashion through his manifest presence.

But as far as I know, while I hope that each of us was helped by being here together and sharing in fellowship in the word, I don't think that we can correctly say that we experienced the manifest presence of God. Now then, if I'm correct in what I have just said, should I go home discouraged and give up? No, of course not. It's up to me to cultivate the presence of God myself.

And is there any reason to think that the promise that we have been looking at, or the time of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, always involves every nation? No. The promise is to those who repent and return. It'd be awfully nice if there was more than that to it.

And all the promises of the Old Testament are what we call conditional promises. For instance, one that has been cited more than once in this conference, 2 Chronicles 7, 14. If my people, and then it lists a series of things.

Now then, this question, who is the person that decides? The person who humbles himself or the God who made them? And the person who, as far as they know, have repented adequately or God himself? Well, in every case, all of these promises are conditional promises, and whether or not we have met the conditions is not up to us to decide, but up to him who made these promises. But listen carefully. The one thing there is no danger of our doing wrong or thinking wrong concerning God will keep his promises when the conditions of that promise are fulfilled.

So, I have mentioned as the third category, the cultivated presence. What are you to do tomorrow and on Saturday and next Wednesday, et cetera? Oh, it would have been nice if they had had the manifest presence in that term conference, but in that it didn't happen. I'll just return to my normal foolish way.

No, it is up to me and up to you to cultivate the presence that I long for, and that cultivation might include sacrifice. It wasn't easy for many of you to get here, but here you are, and honestly, it wasn't easy for me either, though I live nearby. It would have been a whole lot easier to stay home on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday than to be here, and I think that could be said by all instead of just by me.

But every single day from now on, as long as I live, which may be another week or a month or a year, who knows? I am to cultivate the presence of God, and that means that I don't do anything but what I quickly repent of if it's out of the way or a contrary to God. But even more, I deliberately on a daily basis seek the face of the living God. It's inadequate to say, well, in heaven, all of these things will be straightened out, and I'll wait till then.

No, we are on a daily basis as we now live to do everything in our power to cultivate the presence of God. Now, that means at least these several things. It means accepting him as he is and ourselves as we are not.

Now, he is holy, but I am not, and I think it's safe to say that those of you that I know aren't holy either as God is holy. I don't mean to say by that that you're totally unmindful of the place of holiness, but I don't see anybody with the right to brag that they have arrived. All of us should have a yearning to be as holy as he is holy and to know no real satisfaction until we can honestly believe that that is true of us.

And looking at it realistically, I used to think as a young lad, if I lived to any age whatsoever, it would get easier, but it doesn't. It gets harder and harder and harder, and even at my age, it is immensely more difficult to walk with God than when I was a boy. But still, it is my duty and my privilege to cultivate the presence of the Lord and to yearn for his manifestation in my own heart.

And then I want to mention as well that God is sovereign, and we are not. Many a time, somebody has done something that I think was wrong, and I've had to bite my tongue and keep my mouth closed. I don't say I've always accepted that I should do that.

I was in an automobile ride one time from a hotel to a conference center, and on one side, there was a pastor of the Bellevue Baptist Church, and on the other side, there was E.V. Hill, and the driver turned about more than was safe, and he asked the man on my right, I've heard, said he, that you have 11,000 members in your church, and I would like to know whether that's true or not. And Adrian Rogers was mighty slow in responding, but eventually, he said, well, it's not true. We have 13,000 members, and this old guy standing here wanted to open his mouth and say, how many were present on Sunday? And right away, I realized that the motivation within toward that was not from God, and that my intention was to knock him down, and I don't always see what's coming, but that time I did, and I said, Lord, help me to keep my mouth shut, and strangely, I did, and even more strangely, the next week, I was home, and who appeared in my office but the chairman of the deacons of the Bellevue Baptist Church, and he arrived in a very jubilant fashion and said to me, we had the largest attendance in our history on Sunday, and I am really excited.

He said for the first time ever, we broke the 5,000 mark. Now, it doesn't take a Philadelphia lawyer to know that there's a considerable difference between 5,000 and 13,000, and I couldn't help but wonder where all those members were on Sunday when the chairman of the deacons said they weren't in church, and I understood that in the earlier days of America, a church might have 17 members and 680 in attendance, but things are radically turned around so that it would be almost safe to say that every single church has more members than attenders, and sometimes that difference is in multiple thousands. Look, friends, there is something about the church distinctly different from the Lord.

What the church is now boasting about is often something that the Lord himself has condemned. After all, as I said, he is sovereign, and we are not. What he does matters, and often what we do doesn't, and it seems to me that part of the cultivating of the presence of God is that we cease to do what we please, and

we learn to do what he pleases, not because you're tired as well as I'm tired.

I won't stretch this out except to ask you a question or two. Now, when Israel escaped from Egypt and passed through the Red Sea on dry land and had the Egyptian army that was pursuing them drowned to death, how long did it take the people to forget what God had done, and how many of those people that crossed the Red Sea on dry ground entered the land of promise? Is it not significant that we are incredibly unlike God himself? He could make the Red Sea wall up so that people could walk across on dry ground. You can't do that, and I can't do that.

I can't even be good all the time, nor can you, but God is. But we want to think not only of his sovereignty and his holiness, but we would be wise to think about his goodness. As I tried to point out already on a couple of occasions, we must cease to do evil and learn to do good, and some of us are terribly slow learners.

But God is good, and he hasn't given up on us. But I move from that matter to the fact that we know that God is good. Now, I've been married just over 60 years of age, and my dear wife Maggie, who as most of you know, is badly crippled, and that's why she's not here, has called me a great variety of things.

But she's never called me good. Why? Well, she has tried not to be erroneous in what she called me, and if she ever called me good, she would be in error. But God is good, even though I am not.

And in cultivating his presence, I must learn about the things that he likes and pursue them, more than concern myself with the things I like and pursue those matters. And then I want to say to you also what is obviously true. God is eternal, and I've talked to you a moment ago about being gone from this earth in a few days.

Not because I know that's what's going to happen, but because I know that it could happen. And it is possible that every single person in this room will be gone before I am. Now, I've been around longer than as far as I know anybody who's here, but God has been around a lot longer.

God is truly eternal. I didn't always exist even though I will never die, but God himself always existed and will never die under any circumstance, and I should keep that constantly in mind. But also face to reality that when we cultivate the presence of God, change is guaranteed.

And obviously, as all of us know, when we talk about the manifest presence, there is incredible expectation of change. But I wonder how many of us have faced the fact that we may have to change our own personal habits. Do you know what has often happened in revival? Men who were used to sleeping eight hours out of every 24 came nowhere near a bed for days and days as the kingdom of God was advancing.

And can you imagine a grossly overweight person being right with God? Change is sure to come as the presence of God is cultivated in our own lives, and we've got to face that reality. If you don't want change, don't cultivate God's presence. We've no way of knowing in advance what that change will look like, but we know that it's going to come.

But not only does the presence of God completely alter us and change what we are, it also changes our priorities. And this is one of the reasons that church so desperately needs true revival. If they had any good sense at all, it would automatically change the stupid things that it does.

But you can't cultivate the presence of God very long before you see the absurdity of certain things and you discontinue them. And again, I say to you, if you're one of those that doesn't like change, then don't pray for the presence of God in any way. Don't cultivate what you don't want.

Now, you know how absurd it would be for me to buy a hundred bushels of wheat seed. Now, I happen to own a much bigger piece of ground than most of you, but it's not big enough to accommodate a hundred bushels of seed. And all of us should learn that it is only foolish to cultivate what we don't want.

But as I have indicated, you're tired, I'm tired, and I'm going to have to quit. When we talk about the presence of God, it is much more than the matters that I have tried to call to your attention. There is an incredible need.

I need the nearness of God. You need the nearness of God. Your society needs the nearness of God.

So, if I'm cultivating his presence, it is much more serious cultivation when I realize the need. And when I'm motivated by the realization that God himself can change and does change what is needed. Right now, every one of us should repent as fully and completely as we know how.

And in cultivating the presence of God, we'll add to the number of things we need to repent concerning. And so, I close this brief series by saying that the promise is given to those who repent and return. But it is God who decides who has repented and returned and who hasn't.

Help us, oh God. To the glory of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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