

## **Man-Pleasing**

Before us today is a matter which seems to have each one of us in its crosshairs. I doubt that anyone can consider the matter of man-pleasing, or the fear of man and feel that he or she is exempt from this sin. Indeed, the fear of man comes in so many forms, so many shapes, that it would be hard to list them all.

Yes, we think immediately of the teen giving in to peer pressure, afraid of rejection, and so saying and doing things he or she wouldn't otherwise, but for the fear of man. Or we think of the person living with a near obsession with outward appearance, continually making sure that clothing, jewellery, hair, make-up, shoes, and fashion is up-to-date, or impressive, or at least fits in with the others.

But if that manifestation of the fear of man doesn't fit you, don't worry, there are plenty of other kinds. There is the kind that is continually second-guessing our words and actions when we were with others, replaying them over and over, fretting over what people thought of us for saying this or that.

There is the kind that lives with comparisons, comparing your parenting to another's parenting, comparing houses, gardens, clothes, cars, holidays, children, children's clothes, children's schools, children's manners, spouses.

The fear of man comes in the form of being overcommitted, the person who can never say no, who always picks up the slack, and takes on the tasks others dump on her. She lives in a see-saw world between guilt and resentment, feeling she must say yes, and yet angry that she does.

Facebook and social media have introduced a whole new range of fear of man flavours. Posting so as to get as many 'likes' and flattering comments from my friends, creating an exaggerated image of how glamorous my life is, so as to bait the veiled envy of others, or sharing with others what is either utterly ephemeral or even intensely private, encouraging others to be voyeurs, and ourselves to be exhibitionists. Checking and re-checking your posts to see who has liked it, and then fretting most over who has not, scanning through posts and despising Miss Perfect for her life, venting about some event so as to garner sympathy and pity. This is all fear of man, man-pleasing, only now it is even less human.

Some man-pleasers are social chameleons, blending their ways and manners and speech into whatever our social environment is at the time – that is the fear of man. Other man-pleasers are the class clowns, the centre of attention, the life of the party, the local comedian. Some man-pleasers are terrified of being disliked. Other man-pleasers want to be provocative and claim how little they care about what people think of them. But ironically, they do that because they want to be admired by people for being so provocative.

Some man-pleasers want peace at all costs and avoid even necessary disagreement. Other man-pleasers are competitive for everything, so long as they can keep beating other people – which is more fear of man.

I have counselled man-pleasers who have made idols out of their spouses and children, and are ironically destroying the people they are supposed to love, because they are in the grip of the fear of man. I have counselled other man-pleasers who live in perpetual fear of men they have never met, timid of going out, paralysed by fear of crime.

The point is, the fear of man is in every one of us. Indeed, it is clearly a sin deeply allied with selfishness, and so wherever you find selfishness, you are going to find some manifestation of man-pleasing, the fear of man.

Now God is very aware of this tendency in our hearts, and He addresses it several times in

Scripture. One of the clearest places is Proverbs 29:25. I want us to use this as our base text for understanding the fear of man.

*The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe. (Prov. 29:25)*

Here in Proverbs 29:25 we are going to learn of the disease and the cure, the problem, and the solution. Two phrases are laid parallel to each other – the fear of man – which brings a snare, and – trusting in the LORD, which brings safety. Hebrew wisdom literature and poetry often makes use of this parallelism – putting two thoughts side by side. Hebrew parallelism can serve many functions, but here it serves the function of contrast.

The fear of man stands antithetically to trusting in the Lord. The fear of man drives out faith in God, and vice-versa.

What I want us to do is to take this in two halves. First, we are going to understand the meaning of man-pleasing from God's point of view, and second, we are going to study the cure, the obedient response that God calls for.

Let me summarise the first part of this verse:

### **I. Fear of Man Is a Self-Imposed Trap**

The fear of man brings a snare. A snare is a trap, a device used to catch animals. Obviously, a trap is hidden, and disguised, because it is intended to catch an animal that doesn't want to be caught. But once caught, the animal cannot get out, and has lost its freedom.

Scripture tells us that man-pleasing is the same. Like a trap, we find ourselves in a kind of bondage. We have lost some freedom, because now what we do or don't do is handcuffed to other people. The fear of man means your life is now constricted, you are bound, limited, perhaps even paralysed because of the fear of man.

Ed Welch, in his excellent book “When People Are Big and God is Small” summarises the fear of man as being one or more of three fears: First, you can fear that people will find out what you are really like or what you have done and expose you. Second, because of something you do or are or have or say or wear, people will reject you and despise you. The third is that people will in some way or another attack us and harm us, verbally, physically. Humiliation, heckling, and harm. Shamed, shunned, and shattered.

And like every sin, there is something originally good that is twisted and perverted by pride into something evil. For example, there is a healthy sense of shame for what is wrong. The old King James talks about the virtue of shamefacedness, which meant a sense of modesty and propriety. If someone has lost the ability to blush at her own exposed nakedness, we do not admire her lack of fear of man, we say she has lost all shame. It is a good thing to not want to be exposed, to not want your sins and failing paraded. It is a good thing to want our sins covered – the question really is how and by whom.

It is also not wrong to desire the company and fellowship of people. We should want the society and friendship of godly people. There is a sense in which we should fear losing the respect and company of the right kind of people. If this weren't true, then what good would church discipline ever do? The point of the process is that there is a sting to being excluded, there is a painful shame that is meant to goad a person to repentance. This is a good kind of fear of man.

And it is definitely not wrong to want to avoid threats to life and limb. We should want to avoid the dangers of violent crime, of loss, of injury. This is an otherwise healthy love of life.

The original good – desiring to have a good name and not a ruined one, the desire to have fellowship with godly people, and the desire to be free of danger to life are not evil desires. But the nature of sin is to take a lawful love and turn it into an unlawful one. It takes a good thing, and by inflating its importance, turns it into an evil thing.

And that brings us back to our summary of the first half of Proverbs 29:15: - man-pleasing is a self-imposed trap. Proverbs is not giving us this information as if we are helpless victims of the fear of man; it is meant to tell us to avoid this trap. And if we can avoid it, then we are the ones who lay it for ourselves.

It sounds contradictory – a self-imposed trap. Who tries to trap himself? Well, that's the conflicted nature of fallen human beings. James tells us that we are capable of deceiving ourselves. That is, we tell ourselves lies until we believe them. We can suppress some truths. So in this sin, we can focus on what seems reasonable – not wanting to be humiliated not wanting to be rejected, not wanting to be harmed, but we ignore how much we want those things, we ignore what a priority we have made those things, we fail to see how tightly we are clinging to these things.

So here is the secret that Proverbs is teaching us, the fear of man is really an idolatrous love of self. I do not fear man sinfully because of my deep love for my neighbour. I fear man because of what he or she may do to me, what my neighbour may withhold from me. The sinful fear of man is not driven by a desire to love others. When trapped by the fear of man, it is because in those moments I am at the centre of my own orbit, and the gravitational pull that others have on me is because it has become so important to me that they orbit me as I want them to.

What Proverbs wants you to know is that you trap yourself when you treasure other's opinions of you more than that of God's, because you have placed yourself at the centre. The first issue is not how important others have become to you; it is how important you have become to you. To cave in to social pressure is not because you love yourself too little and need others to affirm you, it's because you love yourself so much and want others to affirm you. You have to see that excessive competitiveness is wanting to be seen as better than others, so that you would be admired. We must see our envy as a sign of desiring the praise of man for better things. We must see our excessive desire to please others by never saying no, by taking unnecessary responsibility for other's lives, is a desire to please ourselves using others. We want to be known as a saviour, as a wonderfully kind and merciful person. We must see our inability to say no, to withdraw for fear of hurting others is not so much a love for others as it is a love of ourselves, not wanting to appear or be known as someone who hurts others.

In other words, the fear of man is a really the love of self using man. But once we allow this selfishness to grow, soon we grant to others a place in our lives they should not have, and before long we are in fear of them. We are trapped, because now we have inflated people, and demoted God, but the root cause seems invisible to us – which is a profound selfishness.

Now in a very real sense, that's good news. Because I cannot change other people. I cannot control whether someone will humiliate me, expose me, shun me, withhold approval, slander me or harm me physically. But I can change how important that is in my own eyes. I can change whether the ultimate love in my life is self or not.

And that leads us then to the second part of the verse, which is the cure, or the solution.

*The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe. (Prov. 29:25)*

## II. Faith In God is the Security You Seek

Notice the fear of man is laid parallel to trusting God. In other words – the fear of man is really faith in man and not God. Driven by selfishness and pride, we look to other men as opposed to God. But Scripture says, it is trust in God, a reverent faith in Him, that brings safety.

Here we are, through our sin fearing that men will harm us, humiliate us, heckle us, and we worry, and fret, and scheme and plan to avoid that. But all along, Scripture says, the safety you are seeking lies in this relationship of truth and submission to God.

How is that possible? The Bible gives you three ways that this kind of walk with God drives out the selfish fear of man.

**First, faith enlarges God and shrinks men.** Charles Spurgeon said, “The fear of God is the death of every other fear; like a mighty lion, it chases all other fears before it.” The fear of God is the sense of awe before a God who is both infinitely great and infinitely good. The tension and yet harmony of His greatness and goodness, His justice and mercy, His might and His gentleness, His wrath and His love, cause a submitted, obedient, admiration in those who are His.

Now the greater our sense of this God, who has made us, redeemed us, and providentially watches over us, necessarily the smaller men must seem to us.

*“I, even I, am He who comforts you. Who are you that you should be afraid Of a man who will die, And of the son of a man who will be made like grass? <sup>13</sup> And you forget the LORD your Maker, Who stretched out the heavens And laid the foundations of the earth; (Isa. 51:12-13)*

When we are deepening in our walk with God, taking in His Word, worshipping Him in private and in public, our understanding of Him should be growing. This text is saying, your god is too small, if man is your greatest concern. Jesus put it this way, when He said, “<sup>28</sup> *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matt. 10:28*

Invariably, the person in the grip of the fear of man has a diminished view of God. Instead of seeing God as the Judge, they give the opinions of others more weight. Instead of seeing God as the One who atones for sins, they fret about covering their own sins from others. Instead of seeing God as the one whose approval counts, they try to gain the applause of fickle men. Instead of seeing God as the one who beautifies us with the robes of righteousness, they try to do and say the things that will make people admire.

But to the Christian growing in the knowledge of God, he can say, “So what if this person seeks to shame me. My sins are covered in Christ. His name is now mine. My reputation died with Christ. The one who will defend me is the Advocate Christ Jesus.”

“So what if this person will reject me, or disapprove of me, or ridicule me. God had made a verdict on my life, being in Christ, I am accepted in the beloved. His righteousness is mine, and I long for Him to say, Well done, you good and faithful servant.

“So what if man seeks to harm me. My body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. God will only allow that which will conform me to the image of Christ, and in the end, whatever happens to me in this body, I am eternally safe in Christ.”

There is nothing more practical than deepening your theology. Go deep in the things of God, make progress in the knowledge of God, study the person and works of God, and watch how people begin to shrink in comparison.

Job was upset that he had lost his reputation, and people now scorned him, and his so-called friends

accused him of evil. But once God revealed Himself to Job, all that faded away. Job said, “ *I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, But now my eye sees You. (Job 42:5)*”

There is a second effect of this faith, this trust in God. Not only does it enlarge God and shrink man, but a **life of faith in God is a life of self-forgetfulness.**

When our eyes are on God, they cannot simultaneously be on man. “ *44 "How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?" (Joh 5:44)* Faith is antithetical to living for man's honour.

A.W. Tozer writes in *The Pursuit of God*: “Faith is the least self-regarding of the virtues. It is by its very nature scarcely conscious of itself. Like the eye which sees everything in front of it and never sees itself, faith is occupied with the Object upon which it rests and pays no attention to itself at all. While we are looking at God we do not see ourselves – blessed riddance!”

The great joy of faith is not that it affirms self, it is that it frees us from thinking about self altogether. What a bondage, to be consumed with appearance, with reputation, with putting the right foot forward at all times. What a hard life, to always protect self against all threats, dangers, attacks. How wearisome to be ever on your guard against slights, insults, being short-changed, outdone, overlooked, ignored, misrepresented. What a freedom in being outward, in being God-focused, and a genuine servant of others. C.S. Lewis put it this way.

“Christ will indeed give you a real personality: but you must not go to Him for the sake of that. As long as your own personality is what you are bothering about you are not going to Him at all. The very first step is to try to forget about the self altogether. Your real, new self (which is Christ's and also yours, and yours just because it is His) will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him. Does that sound strange? The same principle holds, you know, for more everyday matters. Even in social life, you will never make a good impression on other people until you stop thinking about what sort of impression you are making. Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it. The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it.”

There is a third reason why a life of growing trust in God will be the security we seek and drive out the fear of man. It enlarges God and shrinks man. It is a life of self-forgetfulness.

**Third, a life of faith in God grants courage to face danger.**

There is no doubt that Scripture equates faith with courage. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is choosing to face a fear because of something more important, a greater reality. Every time God said to His people, fear not, He coupled that command with a promise. Whether it was facing enemies, or appearing before a king, or undertaking a mission, or speaking to those who would persecute them, God said, trust in Me, and obey. There is a real danger, there is a threat, but I want you to face it, with My promises.

Now it is true that some fears are simply self-imposed. We can create threats in our minds at 2am in the morning. We can brood and worry, simply because we want a level of control and certainty in our lives which is idolatrous. Pride and selfishness can demand knowledge of the future, demand control over all possible threats, and thinks that by thinking it will eliminate them. It won't. And often, in such a mind, fears multiply.

But having said that, there are real threats in this world. There is a real spiritual battle going on with real and dangerous foes. The world is full of evil people. We live in tumultuous times. Uncertainty and instability abounds. Christianity is increasingly frowned upon.

And when we are surrounded with real threats, what we need is courage. We acknowledge that the danger is real, but we do not allow the danger to master us.

Whether it be the danger of a child disliking you because you discipline her, or the fear of a church member taking revenge because you expose his sin – it takes courage. The fear of evangelising in a pluralistic world, the fear of travelling at night to see someone needy in the hospital, the fear of teaching others lest your weaknesses be highlighted, the fear of people's response to you if you go into ministry or missions – these can only be countered with courage.

The life of faith is a life of courage. So much so, that the Bible says this about cowards: <sup>7</sup> *"He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son."* <sup>8</sup> *"But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."* (Rev. 21:7-8)

God is compassionate on our timidity. But those who choose to reject Christ, and so do not live by faith at all, will be numbered among the cowardly.

We are looking for safety for ourselves when we fear man. But that's the first problem – we focus on self, and elevate our own importance above God's glory. The second problem is where we look for that safety – man. <sup>5</sup> *Thus says the LORD: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man And makes flesh his strength, Whose heart departs from the LORD. (Jer. 17:5)* Once we go down that path, we find ourselves trapped in a bondage of man's opinions and man's actions that stifles the very joy of life.

The answer is not found in self-esteem. It is not found in despising your neighbour. It is found in a life of growing faith in God – knowing and loving him. As the knowledge of Him magnifies, it puts man in perspective. As our eyes are on Him, we are relieved from forever keeping vigil over our own image. And as we live a life of faith, we can courageously face those legitimate dangers, without being ensnared by fear of man.

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