

THE CALL TO GODLINESS in an AGE OF JUDGEMENT - 1

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

A shoot will come up from the root of Jesse; The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him - the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord and he will delight in the fear of the Lord". Isaiah 11: 2-3

This scripture from Isaiah is, of course, a prophecy concerning Jesus, Jesus the anointed one on whom the Spirit of God came to rest in fullest measure. It may surprise us, however, that the prophet speaks of the Spirit of the "*fear of the Lord*" as coming to rest on Jesus. The "*fear of the Lord*" sounds very much like an Old Testament concept, hard and somewhat out of place in the New Testament where we think more of such concepts as the "Loving Father" and the God of Love. How is it possible that the Holy Spirit should be a Spirit of the fear of the Lord? We can fully understand the "Spirit of wisdom and understanding or the Spirit of love" coming on Jesus, but what does the "Spirit of the fear of the Lord" mean?

We can gain a definition of the fear of the Lord from two Old Testament scriptures: Proverbs 8:3, "*To fear the Lord is to hate evil*", and Psalm 34:11,14a "*....listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord ... turn from evil and do good*". These two verses say the same thing and make it clear that "fearing the Lord" has to do with turning from evil, even hating evil! So a person who fears the Lord is a person who hates evil. The Lord himself hates evil. He is holy in his essential nature and evil is against everything God is. Though we may learn from 1 John 4:16, that "*God is love*", that love is clearly a holy love; it has no tolerance of evil, indeed the fire of God's love seeks to burn up and destroy evil. Evil is contrary to love in every way and the two cannot co-exist. Heaven would not be the place of glory that it is, if the slightest touch of evil were present.

Jesus, we are told, took a "*delight in the fear of the Lord*". In other words he took great pleasure, great satisfaction in godliness, in hating evil and in being free from it. The way of holiness for him was not a huge imposition or an intolerable demand or an impossible goal but a great release. He was pleased to go that way and powerfully motivated toward godliness. This delight was a consequence of the anointing of the Spirit, for the Spirit of God himself delights in holiness. The Spirit of God was, therefore, a huge enabler in the human Jesus toward holiness. Jesus not merely hated evil, but he positively loved righteousness. Our modern generation is much concerned with the anointing of the Spirit for praising, preaching, witnessing and service, and quite rightly so. We long for such an anointings. But at this moment in time, when everything in society seeks to obscure godliness and show less and less of the fear of the Lord, perhaps we have something to learn from former generations of Christians who were very much concerned to drink of the Spirit of holiness and the "*fear of the Lord*". We have a great need of that anointing which generates holiness in our lives as we face up to the future in our society.

Thus the Spirit of the fear of the Lord resting on Jesus speaks of the fact that his life was utterly devoted to godliness; he shared the same hatred of evil as his Father. He could not bear any evil in any form. His heart was at one with the Father. His great pursuit was holiness, utter righteousness. This attitude undergirded all he did and taught. There were indeed moments when this hatred of evil came out in righteous anger. He could not tolerate the sordid money making in his "Father's house" and took a whip of cords; he could not tolerate the obtuseness and opposition of the religious leaders to his compassionate Sabbath healings, and he severely and publically rebuked them. But mostly the fear of the Lord came out in the clarity with which

he expounded the Law of Moses and taught the Law of holy love, showing the way of repentance.

In his teaching Jesus had one standard - "*Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect*" Matt. 5:48.

His call to his own generation was a call to step out of any easy-going moral behaviour and "tighten the belt" - a call to step up a gear in their concept and pattern of living. The big danger in our own generation is our blindness to the extent to which the world is creeping even into Christian behaviour, and our unthinking tendency to take on board the covetous, easy-going, pleasure loving materialistic values that mark out our society. Standards can so quite easily slip, unnoticed! It's an atmosphere in which we particularly need the sharp, probing teaching of Jesus. It's very much a time for us, especially, though by no means exclusively, among our coming up generation.

The Sermon on the Mount, for example, expresses this sharpness. It is teaching that needs to be re-visited; we need to think much more deeply into what Jesus actually said and overcome any familiarity with the text. In that sermon he does not overrule the Ten Commandments by vague soft statements but underlines them and brings out from them demands that seem overwhelming. So, it's not just the act of adultery that brings condemnation, but unclean sexual thinking that has to be dealt with (Matt 5:27ff); it is not just murder that is culpable but an anger in the heart is equally culpable (Matt 5:21ff). The whole sermon is very probing; it probes not just our actions but our hearts. We need to allow ourselves to be probed. And there is so much more than the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus goes on probing.

This side of his teaching must not be overlooked even though there are in his life some wonderful positive examples of a compassionate, loving heart, ready to forgive and restore. His humility, his lack of personal ambition, readiness to turn the other cheek, readiness to meet the "outcast", his patience etc. are all displayed for us in the gospels and we are expected to follow in the same path. On the other hand we must not overlook the fact that when Jesus is calling for exemplary behaviour he makes it quite plain that any and all evil behaviour will have severe judgemental consequences. We need to take to heart such searching comments as "anyone who is angry will be liable to judgement" Matt 5:22, and "if your eye causes you to stumble into unclean thinking and behaviour, do whatever it takes to prevent that eye seeing what it sees, or your whole body may be cast into Hell" (Matt 5:29). There is grave danger in letting slip our call to godliness. It's a much more serious a business than we think.

The word "fear" in the expression "the fear of the Lord" is best thought of as a reverence or awe, not a slavish fear. Nonetheless the overtone of some "apprehensiveness" in the word "fear" is not out of place and should not be toned down when we mortals face the Almighty and Holy God. He is indeed to be loved and we are to take great delight in his love, but the fact remains, as Jesus made plain, the apprehensiveness is not out of place if we live fast and loose to his moral demands; there will be repercussions. I love the sea and the waves, but both are to be treated with the utmost respect and caution if disaster is to be avoided.

As a final thought, it is interesting that the Spirit of wisdom and understanding in the anointing of Jesus is alongside the Spirit of the fear of the Lord in our opening text. The two are actually very much related. Twice in Proverbs (1:7; 9:10), we are told that "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom/knowledge*". Exactly the same truth is written in Ps 111:10. This means that the person who sets their face against evil will make wise decisions and fruitful choices in life and the person who walks in uprightness will find blessing. . On the other hand those who are prepared to follow evil inclinations will ultimately come to grief. Righteousness

and wisdom walk together; they are two sides of a coin. Thus the Spirit of wisdom is at the same time the Spirit of the fear of the Lord'. This means that at the very root of wisdom lies a heart set on righteousness, a heart that fears the Lord.

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