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Chapter 1

FEAR OF MAN

When I first became a Christian, I remember feeling carefree, and to say I was excited about the Lord would have been an understatement. I was also a sponge. Anything anyone said to me about my newfound faith I took as “the gospel.” As you might imagine, for a young, impressionable Christian this was not good. I didn’t fully understand grace, and as people would talk about sin, I began to become fearful of not measuring up. I began to live in fear of sinning. I began to question my motives, actions, thoughts—everything—and assume everyone was questioning them too! I was afraid of the judgment of others. I was terrified of the opinions of others. I judged others in fear, and I feared man.

“Fear of man” is a term used to describe the heart of someone who acts or says, or does *not* act or say, certain things out of fear of what others may think. There’s an example of it in Scripture, in John 12, when the people and authorities believed in Jesus but would not confess it for fear that they would be shunned (John 12:42–43). Even Peter,

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who walked with Christ and was one of His disciples, denied Him three times because of his fear of man (Mark 14:66–72). Caring deeply about what others think can be damaging to our faith and bring great despair. At least that was the case for me.

The Many Cares of What Others Think

Sin isn't a foreign concept. It is that unfortunate condition we face at birth and which remains in us until that moment when the Lord takes us home. I have sinned, I continue to sin, and I will sin more. But in my pride, there was a time when I didn't want anyone to think that I did sin. I hated the idea of disappointing anyone. It didn't come to light for me until I was a young-adult Christian, but it was something that I had battled all my life—pleasing people.

I was the all-star cheerleader, flute-playing band geek, honor student, student-government president, and good girl (except with boys—I liked boys at a young age). I was *that* girl. The overachiever, friends with everyone, always smiling (I was genuinely a happy girl and okay—some things haven't changed, but now it's the joy of the Lord), typical goody two-shoes. I had a secret though: I loved the praise of people and hated the idea of doing wrong. The most important person in my life as a young girl was my father, and I wanted most to please him.

So I worked hard, generally obeyed (we didn't have many rules), and excelled in extracurricular activities and school. I think this fear of man and desire to honor my father was actually a God-given, gracious wedge of protection. Kids were experimenting with drugs, and I didn't want anything to do

with that. I wasn't a partier, but I did have a "serious" relationship as a young girl with a boy and remember talking about that carnal relationship with my father. It was my respect for him that led me to cut it off. There was a healthy respect and fear in that instance, which I'll write about later, but, overall, many of my actions were simply a desire to please and be seen as doing good. My father did instill in me a love for people, so not everything I did was to please people, but the idea of disappointing my father tore me up inside.

So when I became a Christian in my twenties, and the Holy Spirit began to reveal my sinful heart, I was astonished. I couldn't believe that there was a possibility that part of my motivation to do good and be all that I could be was actually born out of sin. After all, I was a good person, right? My pride was so great that I was condemned. Ultimately the problem with my people pleasing was that I had come to believe that the opinions of others about me were far greater than God's.

Lou Priolo wrote in his book *Pleasing People* that one of the many temptations a people pleaser might face is "an excessive love of praise [that] tempts you to believe man's opinion of yourself over God's opinion."¹ The foolishness of this temptation is that the men and women we seek to please are just like us—fallible.

This fear of man is manifested in many ways. In my life, it was all about looking good and, as I mentioned earlier, doing my best not to disappoint my father. (Ironically, it was terribly hard to disappoint my father. He was incredibly gracious, which is what made my fear that much sillier.) For others the fear might be driven by a desire to fit into a certain group or by a desire not to be associated with a certain person.

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Perhaps you refuse to associate with certain people, rejecting them in order to appear a certain way to others. Social media has a way of pulling out the fear of man. We check to see who has “liked” our post or picture, fearing what we write, hoping to be noticed.

You’ve heard the saying, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). It’s definitely true regarding the fear of man. Peter (you know, the man who received the keys to the kingdom) denied his friend and Savior not once but *three* times. He didn’t deny Him during happy days. He denied Christ on the way to Christ’s death, and he did it out of the fear of man. Looking into this account from Peter’s life will give you and me a glimpse into the motivations and consequences of this fear.

Jesus had prophesied that Peter would deny Him, but Peter strongly objected, saying, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you” (Mark 14:31). He fell into the trap of believing that he was above this sin. Paul warns us that if we think we stand, we must “take heed lest [we] fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). No one is completely immune to certain temptations, but Peter was sure of himself. He was sure that he would stand strong with Jesus, facing the authorities and mockers, till the bitter end (Mark 14:29).

You know, however, how it turns out. Peter did not stand with Christ and denied Him twice to a servant girl and then to an entire crowd. Peter knew immediately after that rooster crowed that he had failed the test that he’d been sure he was going to pass. Peter didn’t continue in pride or make excuses for his denial. He fell to the ground and wept. I imagine the tears were many. He had betrayed his friend,

teacher, and Savior for fear of his own life being taken from him. Peter didn't want to die. At that moment Peter forgot what it meant to follow Christ.

When we fear man, we join Peter in his moment of forgetfulness. Peter forgot that those who kill the body cannot kill the soul (Matthew 10:28). You will see that Scripture passage referenced in various ways throughout this book because it is packed, in just a few short words, with an ocean of theological truth about the fear of the Lord. There is only one whom we need to fear, and that is the Lord. But Peter forgot, as you and I so often do. His pursuit was self-preservation. It was more important to him to blend in with the crowd than be known as "one of those people."

Earlier I mentioned that Peter received the keys to the kingdom. I mentioned it in such a way as not to make him look foolish or to condemn him but rather to highlight the amazing grace of Jesus. Jesus knew that Peter would deny Him. Jesus is God and therefore possessed all the foreknowledge of His Father. He not only predicted Peter's denial (Mark 14:27–31); Jesus knew that one day He would honor Peter despite it (Matthew 16:19). And He does the same for us.

Tragically, you and I deny Christ every time we care more about what others think of us than of what God has already declared. Every time we seek man's approval and praise, we say to the Lord that His sacrifice was not enough. And He says to us that He became "fear of man" so that we would be counted as righteous. We are presented before the Lord as concerned only with loving and pleasing Him—and it is finished because of Christ. He is already pleased with you and with me.

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There's another troubling problem with the fear of man, one that we might not give much thought to, and that is judgment. The fear of man isn't always our denial of another or our attempt to impress; we can fear man in our private thoughts about them. Our made-up scenarios and fear can lead to judging others.

Slander, Judgment, and the Fear of Man

I can remember an incident when I heard my name and personhood slammed. It was pretty terrible. It hurt. I went into the room and immediately confronted those responsible. I cried, they confessed, and that was that. They asked for forgiveness, and I forgave.

We don't typically learn what others *really* think of us. And I often wonder if we really want to know. Most of the time we're left to assume the best or nothing at all. Unfortunately, though, many of us don't assume the best or nothing at all. We're preoccupied by the opinions of others. This is the fear of man. It can show up in a variety of forms, but there's one thing we can be certain of—it's a snare (Proverbs 29:25). I've discovered that when I'm tempted to fear man, it's usually rooted in fear of what someone else thinks of me. But as I dig deeper, I realize that I'm actually judging and assuming the worst of *them*.

Fear of Man and Judgment

The fear of man so often ends with judging others, because we begin to assume we know another's motives, thoughts, character, and intentions. Someone forgets to answer an email, so you assume you're not a priority and that she is

selfish. It turns out she was on vacation. You pass someone in the hall, and he doesn't wave, so you assume he doesn't like you or is rude. It turns out he didn't see you. You invite someone to do something, and she kindly declines, so you assume she's disappointed in you. It turns out she simply doesn't want to attend or is sick or tied up. It really doesn't matter what the other person thinks or does, but our preoccupation with worrying about what others think of us drives us to sinfully judge.

Fear of Man and Self-Forgetfulness

The false thoughts leading us to judge others are a form of pride that can only be remedied by what Tim Keller calls "gospel humility." As he explains in his helpful book *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*:

Gospel humility is not needing to think about myself. Not needing to connect things with myself. It is an end to thoughts such as, "I'm in this room with these people, does that make me look good? Do I want to be here?" True gospel humility means I stop connecting every experience, every conversation, with myself. In fact, I stop thinking about myself. The freedom of self-forgetfulness. The blessed rest that only self-forgetfulness brings.²

Preoccupation with what others think is pride. Perhaps you long to be highly regarded. Maybe you hate the idea of being misunderstood (oh, how I relate). Whatever else it is, it's pride, and we know God opposes the proud (James 4:6).

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Every true believer longs for gospel humility. None of us wishes to stay as we are—we want to be transformed into Christlikeness. Christians don't desire to disobey God and grieve the Spirit. Besides, it's no fun being consumed by what you think someone else thinks. Keller shares the secret to the sweet forgetfulness that we find in the gospel:

Do you realize that it is only in the gospel of Jesus Christ that you get the verdict before the performance? . . . In Christianity, the verdict leads to performance. It is not the performance that leads to the verdict. In Christianity, the moment we believe, God says, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Or take Romans 8:1, which says, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." In Christianity, the moment we believe, God imputes Christ's perfect performance to us as if it were our own, and adopts us into his family. In other words, God can say to us just as he once said to Christ, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."³

The verdict of "well done" is in, and as a result you and I run the race of faith, putting off judgment and the fear of man. Even though we will fail miserably, we make the effort nonetheless. After all, God's "well done" motivates and inspires a life consecrated to His glory.

I wish I could say that the fight against fear of man and the temptation to judge others is easy. But it isn't. We can be assured, though, that God will indeed finish the good work

He began in us (Philippians 1:6). This is a walk of faith, a race to the finish line that will lead us out of our struggle with sin and temptation and into glory. One day we will be with our Savior, worshiping Him forever. We'll never again worship the idol of man.

A Crossroads

When I first heard the good news of the gospel, it was so marvelous and freeing that I couldn't help but rejoice and share it with others. (Have you noticed that about new Christians?) But in what seemed like a moment's time, my joy and carefree spirit became gripped by the fear of man. I was so afraid I was doing something wrong all the time. I had feared man before, but at this time it wasn't hidden from me. It was staring me in the face. There was a short season when I thought I had mastered the beast. I read books (similar to this chapter) entirely dedicated to the topic. I prayed. I did all these things, and it seemed to be working. But then I got married. I remember situation after situation when I feared what my husband thought of me. Did he think my figure was shapely enough? Was I too shapely? What did he think of my cooking? Was my food up to his mother's standards? (She's a gourmet chef without the title or the accolades.) It was a never-ending battle. He would thank me for making a meal but not in the way I hoped, so I just assumed he hated it. I'd feel deflated. Me, me, me. It was all about me.

Unfortunately, it didn't end there. My fear of what others thought of me began to affect my marriage. My husband would reassure me and encourage me about various pursuits, and yet I feared what other women thought. Women

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would share their opinions, and instead of weighing their words against God's Word and trusting the Lord (and my husband), I would become paralyzed by fear. I'd second-guess his decisions, thinking about what others would or wouldn't do. I hated the thought of not being accepted because I was "different."

As I already noted, the fear of man is described in God's Word as a snare (Proverbs 29:25). A snare is a trap. It traps you in your mind and keeps you from obeying, trusting, and fearing the Lord. It is a trap that kept me from trusting my husband with decisions or his word. It is a snare because it traps you into elevating people above God—people become your object of worship.

I found myself at a crossroads. Either I could believe that what God said in His Word about His children is true, or I could continue to trust my own feelings, fears, and thoughts. It was a matter of faith. God says He is for us (Romans 8:31); He views those in Christ as covered in Christ's righteousness (Romans 5:17); and He is working in our life (Philippians 1:6). God was humbling me so that He might lift me up.

The remedy for the fear of man isn't a greater view or love of self. As I said in *United*,

The world's prescription for the cure of the fear of man is to find ways to be proud of oneself and find security in and through the self. Quotes like "Love yourself" or "Believe in yourself" or even the sweet but theologically lame quote widely attributed to Walt Disney, "If you can dream it, you can do it," are all focused on self. But God says that the opposite of

the fear of man isn't finding security and pride in oneself. No, it's placing one's trust and security in Him.⁴

Killing the fear of man is rooted in, as Tim Keller says (borrowing from C. S. Lewis), thinking of yourself less.⁵

For you and me to stop worrying about others, we have to start thinking about Him. As we meditate on the character of God and remember His holiness (Psalm 77:13), omniscience (Psalm 147:5), sovereignty (Deuteronomy 4:39), and love (John 3:16), we begin to experience the beginning of wisdom and understanding (Psalm 111:10). When I began to intentionally think about God's character, I started to experience true freedom in Christ and joy in the Lord. My life was no longer partly dependent on others; it was more fully submitted to God.

Again, it isn't that I think less of myself. I don't fight the fear of man and my concern about what others think by assuming the worst about everything I do and beating myself up while elevating others. I don't deny God's gifts in my life, which would be false humility. I don't walk around with my head down in fear of praise or encouragement either, which would only draw more attention to myself. What I am learning to do is forget about myself so that I can enjoy others and enjoy what the Lord is doing and, most importantly, enjoy and worship my Father.

You may not struggle to the severity that I have, but I don't doubt you've found yourself in situations where you were concerned about what others think of you. It is so easy to do. I believe one reason we care so much about what others think is a desire to preserve an image. We want others

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to think we are carefree or “cool,” so we disobey the Lord in a certain area; we want others to think we are righteous, so we play the good-girl role even when we are miserable; we want others to think we don’t associate with that person or that organization, so we ignore friends (like Peter ignored Jesus). Our actions keep us from loving and serving others, often because we just care so much about what others think. We do this because of pride. Our pride and desire to be seen a certain way prevent us from living the life God desires for us.

So the real question is, do you struggle with finding your full and complete acceptance and satisfaction in God alone? I do, and I’m sure you do too. Everyone does to varying degrees. But if you relate to what I’ve written and sense a deep longing to be accepted by others, you may find yourself experiencing despair. You simply won’t be able to please people. It can’t be done. We can please others but only to a certain degree, and it won’t satisfy. Their praise will only leave us hungry for more. Their affection will leave us wanting. Their acceptance will run out when they sin against us, and we discover they are sinful too. The only thing that will ever satisfy us without disappointment is the Lord.

We can’t find true, lasting pleasure and satisfaction except through and by Him. David understood this, and he wrote, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11). We trade these pleasures, which are forevermore, for the hope of acceptance or praise that lasts a minute and is from mere mortals. When you think about it that way, it’s clear that it’s a worthless pursuit.

The problem with dwelling too long here is that we can

be in danger of becoming too introspective. The point isn't to make you feel sorry for yourself. That's not the goal, and it's not the spirit of self-forgetfulness. What you and I need to do is remember God. We don't have to run after pleasing people, because there is one who is already pleased with us. The blood of Jesus covers the fear of man. God looks on you as righteous, as if you fear Him perfectly. You and I can't preach this to ourselves enough, because we so easily forget. God has the power to change you and me—He will complete His good work.

A Safe Place

Proverbs 29:25 says that those who fear man are ensnared but that those who do not fear man trust the Lord and are safe. In other words, the fear of man reflects a heart that does not trust the Lord. Peter didn't trust that the Lord would protect him, and when I fear what others think, I don't trust that the Lord is pleased with me. But God is after our heart and mind. He wants us to love Him with all our heart and with all our mind (Matthew 23:37). He wants us to trust Him. In Him alone there is peace, rest, and safety.

It's so familiar to hear about how much the Lord forgives sin, and perhaps that's the ultimate expression of His safety (safety from His wrath), but rarely do we talk about this aspect of His character. There is safety in God. You and I think we have to be in control of how we are viewed or of what others think, but God says no, we are safe. We think we need to worry about the harm others could inflict, physical or otherwise, so we withhold speaking about Jesus; but God says no, we are safe. The fear of man leads us into a trap, like a

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caged animal, but the fear of the Lord leads us into the arms of a safe Father. How amazing is that? In chapter 9 we will dive deep into what it means to fear the Lord, but right now just be in awe that you are safe in the Lord.

Perhaps this is your first time facing the fear of man for what it is. As I mentioned before, the Lord desires that we not remain as we are. You and I don't want to be like the man who looks in the mirror and forgets what he looks like (James 1:23–24). If God is bringing the sweet grace of conviction, He will provide the sweet grace of escape, forgiveness, and repentance. Ask God to give you a vision for who He is, and then trust that He is who He says He is. You are safe in Him.



My father passed away my freshman year of college. He battled juvenile diabetes most of his life, and, in the end, cancer and congestive heart failure took him to his final resting place. He was my hero and best friend. The Lord used his life to protect me from much, and He used his death as a means to reveal Himself to me. I no longer had my dad to live for. Upon becoming a Christian, it became so clear to me that God wanted me to understand that He is my Father. And though I sin against the Lord, I don't disappoint Him, because He isn't looking at my performance—He is looking at Jesus. This is remarkable. As His daughter I do want to please Him and give Him the honor due His name, but I do not have to fear His rejection or anger (wrath). This is our Father, ladies. Let this motivate you not to fear another.