

There are two types of fear. There is the fear of death and there is the fear of God. The fear of death is the fear of a slave. It is a false and unbelieving fear. It is how the devil keeps people in bondage. It leads people to rely on their own frantic efforts to gain peace and a good conscience, but it only leaves them condemned and tormented. But true fear of God is that of son to his father. It is to recognize that God alone is the one who kills and makes alive. He is the one who condemns and redeems. And he has sent his Son into the flesh to save us from our sins. He gives faith to the broken heart and comfort to the burdened conscience. We therefore learn to fear him as his dear children. Such fear is not driven by desperate attempts to escape suffering and death. No, this godly, childlike fear is clean and pure, because it is formed by faith in God's promise to forgive, restore, renew, and finally rescue us from this valley of sorrows.

Our Lord warns us against false prophets who come as savage wolves in sheep's clothing. He warns that many will say to him, "Lord! Lord!" but he will cast them out as workers of evil and tell them that he never knew them. A Christian hears this warning of Christ, and it invokes fear – fear that you might be deceived by false prophets, fear that perhaps you already have been deceived, or fear that the Lord will say those dreadful words to you on the last day, "Depart from me, you worker of evil!"

But our Lord does not give us this warning to make us despair and lose hope in our salvation. If you feel a sense of despair, then that is God's law working on you. By all means, you should despair of yourself. Despair of your own merits before God. But Jesus does not say these words to cause you to despair of him. His aim is always to direct you to his words and promises. Jesus warns us so that we do not rely on a shaky foundation of worldly security and comfort. Instead, he directs us to the narrow gate of his blood and righteousness, which only faith can grasp in his sure promise.

So if you experience this fear of death, the torment of judgment, and the terror of thinking that you could lose God's favor in Christ, then don't be alarmed. This is your old Adam dying. This is the rotten fruit of this world being exposed. God is pruning you. He is cutting off the dead branches of your sinful nature. All the while, your faith rests in him who fearfully and wonderfully made you in his own image, who sent his Son to sweat drops of blood and suffer the terrors of death and condemnation in your place. God promises that he is near the broken hearted and distressed. His Spirit rests upon those who tremble at his Word, and he comforts us with the assurance of salvation through his Son. So even if you feel the bondage of sin and death in your dying nature, God has not called you to bondage. He teaches you to fear him as a child fears his loving father. He disciplines you as a father disciplines his son. And he warns you as a father warns his children.

St. Paul tells us that we did not receive the spirit of slavery to make us driven by terror and fear. Instead, we have received the Spirit who makes us God's adopted children. Even the law, which reveals God's wrath against our sins, is not meant to make us live in fear and torment. No, it is meant to drive us to repent of our sins and find refuge only in the gospel of Jesus Christ our Savior. Even as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling, this is with the assurance that it is God who is working in us to will and do according to his good pleasure. He is working all things out for our good. In this way, the Spirit of God, who gives us life through the gospel, teaches us to fear God as his beloved children.

The temptations of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh are constantly at war against our faith. We need to be warned against this. It doesn't do us any good to ignore such attacks. That would only lead us to fall into spiritual sleep and never wake up. We need to be warned against the false prophets who filter into the church. We also need to be warned about the false securities of our own sinful desires.

When we are made more and more aware of these dangers, it is enough to make us feel afraid and terrified. This is why we need the constant assurance and encouragement that we have received the Spirit of God, who adopts us as God's children and strengthens our faith with the assurance that we remain God's children.

So as you consider your Lord's warning, keep in mind why he warns you. He warns you, because you are his sheep and he is your Shepherd. He knows you by name. He is the one who gave his life for you, who suffered and died for you, and whose resurrection brings righteousness and everlasting life for you. His warning is stern and serious. It is a fearful warning. But it doesn't come from a worldly fear of death. These are pure words flowing from the compassion of God himself. Beware of false prophets, he says. Be on your guard. Watch out. As much as these words should make us tremble, they remain words of Spirit and life.

This is because Jesus is teaching us what our faith is in. Our faith is in the Word of Christ. His sheep hear his voice, and they don't recognize the voice of strangers. So as our loving Shepherd, Jesus teaches us how to be on our guard against these strange teachings. He says two things about false prophets. First, they look like sheep, but they are inwardly savage wolves. Second, you will recognize them by what they produce.

False prophets dress like sheep. They pretend to be part of the church. They do this by using Christian language. They might talk about sin, forgiveness, faith, redemption, and all sorts of other terms you have learned from Christ and his Scriptures. But they redefine these words according to worldly standards. Let me give you some examples.

The Bible teaches that sin is disobedience to God's Word. It is at its heart unbelief – not fearing, loving, or trusting in God. False prophets redefine sin as anything that seems to cause offense. Sin therefore ends up being whatever the popular culture calls offensive. The culture says that it is wrong to exclude anyone in any way. So if you say that salvation is found only by faith in Jesus Christ, excluding all other religions, then this is sin. Or sin means not being true to yourself. So if you tell someone that he is wrong, then you are attacking his personal identity, and this is therefore sin. Many also speak and act as if sin is just breaking rules. So as long as you avoid the really big sins and do your best to be a good person, then you will be fine. All of these false definitions of sin are designed to avoid having to stand naked before God's judgment. In other words, they are meant to allow you to avoid the fear of God.

Let me give another example. The bible teaches that faith is trust in God's promise of forgiveness, salvation, redemption, and eternal life through Jesus Christ. The heart is converted by God's Spirit to embrace the mercy and righteousness of Christ. God counts this faith as righteousness in his sight, not because of any good works, but only because of his compassion in his Son who died for our sins and was raised to declare us righteous. But false prophets redefine faith in a few different ways. First, they will define faith as simply knowledge of God's Word. To them, faith is merely thinking the right things or having the right opinions. Many people therefore say that faith can't save you unless you add good works, virtues, and habits to it. Or they talk as if your faith can remain nothing more than this knowledge of the facts as long as you don't do anything really bad. Others define faith as a kind of personal belief in one's own abilities. As long as you believe in yourself, or as long as you have faith in something, then they say that you are on the right track. Finally, others define faith as whatever spiritual exercises make you feel religious enough. Eat the right kinds of food. Engage in the right kinds of discipline. Get connected to some spiritual power so you can feel a sense of calm.

All of these false definitions present faith as something that comes from your own reason, your own strength, and your own exercises. This again is meant to keep you from facing the fearful throne of God's judgment. But faith in Christ doesn't avoid God's judgment. Faith in Christ is able to face the fearful judgment of God with the confidence that Jesus Christ has washed away your sins by his own blood. Faith asserts that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

There are many ways in which these wolves come in sheep's clothing. We could go on and on about how false prophets redefine Christian terms and phrases to promote a worldly doctrine. But at the heart of every error is this. False prophets replace the saving, heavenly doctrine with worldly doctrine. They confuse God's glory with man's glory, Christ's merits with human merits, and heavenly honor with earthly honor.

And this gets to the other thing Jesus teaches us about false prophets. He teaches us how to recognize them. It's often difficult to see how false doctrine slips in under the clothing of the Christian faith. But Jesus teaches us to look at their fruit. Look at what they produce. Look at what their goal is. Is their goal to direct you to Christ as the only hope and comfort? Is their goal to help you bear your cross, fight against temptations, and overcome the devil's lies by holding onto the Christian faith? Or is their goal simply to make you comfortable in this life, honored by this world, and to feel good about yourself? Do they direct you to the authority of Scripture and how it all points to Christ? Or do they explain away Scripture with worldly sources when it says things that make you uncomfortable? Do they encourage you to honor your parents, love your wife, submit to your husband, teach and discipline your children, promote the unity of the Spirit in your congregation, and be content with your station in life? Or do they lead you to neglect these things? Do they show you how the forgiveness of Christ teaches us to bear with one another, seek peace with one another, show patience and forgive one another? Or do they give you license to hold grudges, think the worst about your fellow Christians, and look down on those who seem ignorant or out of touch?

A bad tree produces bad fruit. It promises freedom from fear, but it only leaves you in more terror of losing your earthly comforts. It only leaves you in bondage, regret, despair, and finally eternal death. Such false teachers might manage to convince the whole world that they speak and act for Christ. They may even do amazing things. But they can't fool Christ. He will render his strict judgment.

In the meantime, he warns us to stand guard. Beware of the worldly leaven that only puffs you up with pride. Because this keeps you from facing God. He who warns you is the very Lord who gave his life for you, covers all your sin, and presents you spotless before your Father in heaven. You therefore can be confident in Christ to face God every day. Face his judgment. Fear him. Don't be alarmed if you feel that slavish fear of death bubble up in your heart. That is just your old Adam dying. You have not received the spirit of slavery. You have received the Spirit of Christ who gives you faith to call God your Father. He will not forsake his children. Though he warns you and disciplines you, his mercy remains with you. You know him by his fruit, by the good that he has produced for you through the offering of his Son. He has planted you in his streams of living water. And through faith in Christ, you stand before him. Amen.