

Facing our Fears #3

Life in our country changed in many ways on September 11, 2001. It now takes longer to get onto an airplane and we have to be more careful what we take on board with us. Our government structure has been altered with a new department of homeland security added. And the general tone of many in our nation has been changed from one of carefree optimism before 9/11 to a cautious pessimism almost waiting for the other shoe to fall. Certainly our economy has been affected because of the vast debts incurred by the continuing war against the terrorist regimes. One of the most difficult facets of these changes that have been forced upon us is the inability of most Americans to understand the reasoning process that could lead to terrorist attacks. What could possibly motivate any person to be willing to give up his own life to kill as many other innocent people as possible? We have been told about the religious motivation – that soldiers fighting in a Jihad are taught that their voluntary sacrifice is so valued by Allah that this is the one way that they can be assured of a ticket straight to Paradise. But we all know that this is just a cruel lie – and we can't help but think that a young, healthy man with his whole life ahead of him would have second thoughts about the veracity of this claim as he was preparing to end his life in such a violent manner. It's impossible for us to imagine the horror of a person ending his life taking the lives of thousands of innocent people with him and then immediately facing a holy and righteous God who has revealed as one of His commandments *You shall not commit murder*. So we all suspect that there must be something deeper than mere commitment to a false religious system of belief.

I read an article recently that opened my eyes to see a terrorist's motivation more clearly. This article traced the training of a terrorist. From the days as a child when extremist Islamic doctrine was indoctrinated to the days as a young man when certain qualities were detected that led to recruitment and training. It was near the end of the article that a key was given that opened my eyes to see a power that Al Qaeda has over its terrorist soldiers. As the time is drawing near for the terrorist attack, and as final instructions are being given to the terrorist, the suicide bomber is reminded of the importance of the mission that he is to achieve and of the fact that his family will benefit with financial security from his sacrifice. The terrorist then is asked to make a video in which he verbally speaks of his commitment to the cause and gives his last will and testament and any other final comments that he wishes to make to his family and friends. According to this article that I read, this video is recognized as the point of no return by the Al Qaeda terrorist network. Once their leaders have this video in their hands, they are confident that the terrorist mission will be carried out. Because they realize that the humiliation and loss of face would now be so great for their soldier if he returned back to his family with a failed mission, they are confident that he will carry out their commands even though it means

sure death for him. It is a strange irony that while the purpose of terrorism is to strike fear in the hearts of the innocent, the method that is used in recruiting their kamikazes is also fear – a different kind of fear, fear of what family and friends and fellow terrorists would think if the mission were aborted. A terrorist’s fear of what others might think about him is actually so great that he would rather die himself than have to face it.

Fear of what others think about us, or Peer Fear as I have called it in the title of this sermon, is a struggle that we all face. Happily, in our American culture, loss of face is not such a highly treasured virtue that suicide is a common occurrence when failure or humiliation happens, but peer group pressure is certainly a powerful influence on all of us. Many a young person has succumbed to a harmful habit and many an adult has engaged in shady business practices because of a fear of what his friend or colleague would think of him. How can we overcome the fear of what others might think of us? How can we live our lives free from this most enslaving problem?

Before we address the truths that the Apostle Paul gives in Philippians 2 that would help us think through this issue, let me just say that the answer to this problem is not found in going to the opposite extreme. Some try to defend themselves against the enslavement of peer fear by deciding to live antisocial lives. *I don’t care what anybody thinks, I’m going to do things my own way* is their motto. So if society dictates one value, they automatically do the opposite. But we need to realize that this is still allowing society to dictate and control our actions. It still is allowing our lives to be influenced and even enslaved by a reverse kind of peer fear.

B.J Chandler is an assistant principle in a junior high school in Dardanelle, Arkansas. Several years ago, he called one of his female students into the office because of the strange socks she was wearing. When asked why she was wearing such socks, the young lady exploded: *I have a right to wear anything that I want to. I am an individual and I can dress anyway that I like. Besides, if you would just look around, you would see that all the kids are beginning to wear them.*

An 104 year old was being interviewed by a reporter recently. When asked what she thought the best advantage of being over a hundred years old was, without hesitation she replied, *I don’t have much peer pressure anymore.* It’s interesting that this lady had recognized the influence that peer pressure had been on her throughout her long lifetime.

God desires that we live our whole lives free from the controlling factor of what others might think of us. He knows that we will never truly be free until we conquer this fear. Now I realize that this is easier said than done, but the Apostle Paul gives us some helpful principles towards this end in the letter he wrote to the Philippians.

Paul was in a very precarious situation. He was a preacher who was in prison. And many people were using his situation against him, trying to discredit him and ruin his reputation. Paul refers to these people in the latter part of chapter 1. In verse 17, the Apostle speaks of some who were actually preaching Christ out of envy and strife with the goal of stirring up trouble for Paul in jail. What others could be thinking of him could have weighed very heavily on the mind of the Apostle Paul at this time in his life.

I have a letter in my sermon illustration file supposedly written to a church pulpit committee.

Dear Pulpit Committee:

"I understand your church is looking for a pastor. I should like to submit my application. I am generally considered to be a good preacher. I have been a leader in most of the places I have served. I have also found time to do some writing on the side. I am over fifty years of age, and while my health is not the best, I still manage to get enough work done to please my congregation. As for a reference, I am somewhat handicapped. I have never served in any place more than three years, and the churches where I have preached have generally been pretty small, even though they were located in rather large cities. Some places I had to leave because my ministry caused riots and disturbances. When I stayed, I did not get along too well with other religious leaders in town which may influence the kind of references these places will send you. I have also been threatened several times and been physically attacked. Three or four times I have gone to jail for expressing my thoughts. You will need to know that there are some men who follow me around undermining my work. Still, I feel sure I can bring vitality to your church. If you can use me, I should be pleased to be considered."

Signed, "The Apostle Paul"

There can't be any question that Paul would have been concerned about his reputation as he was sitting in this Roman jail cell. This would have only been natural for the Bible says that a good name and reputation is to be valued very highly. Yet there is no hint that his mind was obsessed with what others were thinking about his plight at this time in the epistle to the Philippians. Instead, Paul focuses on the model of one who perfectly handled the fear of what others might think – the Lord Jesus Christ. And Paul wrote that we should have the same attitude that Christ had.

Now in one sense, I admit that God can't be tempted by Peer Fear because He has no peers. There is only one God. There is no one else in the universe who is His equal. But on the other hand, there are certain expectations assumed of those who have the highest positions. I'm sure that President Bush has times when he doesn't appear very presidential – when he's perspiring heavily from working out in the yard or when he's up to his elbows in grease and oil from repairing a car or machine. But you never see him like that. The president's public relations department knows that it would be disturbing to some people to see their

President in an undignified way so they are careful that they maintain the proper image for the leader of the most powerful nation in the world.

Can you imagine some of the conversations that might have gone on in the angelic realm while the incarnation was taking place? Peter wrote that the angels long to look into the development of the gospel message in 1 Peter 1:12. The word that he uses literally means to be so curious as to crane one's neck in order to get a better view of what's going on. I can just imagine the curiosity and the amazement found in the angelic realm as the redemptive process began to unfold. What is God doing? Planning to go to earth to become a member of the sinful human race? How could He plan to join these creatures that He has made? And to not become their powerful leader but to rather be born as a baby in a filthy stable to 2 poor peasants? That's not very Godlike. How could the creator and sustainer of the whole universe do something that is that much out of character? Isn't He embarrassed? Isn't He humiliated? He's certainly not looking very presidential lying there on that hay bed. It's no wonder that as the angels saw this redemptive process beginning to unfold, they were amazed and astounded. It's no wonder that they gathered in the sky outside of Bethlehem and sang to the shepherds, *Glory to God in the Highest*. And then as Christ's life began to develop, we can just imagine them craning their necks to see these unprecedented developments. God growing and developing as a man? God being tempted to sin by one of His creatures? God being rejected by His creation? God being abused and ridiculed and executed? It certainly didn't appear to be very godlike? Hanging naked on a cross isn't very Presidential, is it? How could God ever do this? Doesn't God care what others think of Him?

The truth of redemptive history that Paul understood very clearly is that God was so committed to His purpose of delivering the human race from the certain destruction caused by their sin that He was willing to act in what we all would consider to be the most unGodlike manner possible. Even though He was in very nature God, the Lord Jesus Christ was willing to take upon Himself the form of a servant, and He was willing to humble Himself, and become obedient to death – even death on a cross. A key attribute of God here in addition to his love and holiness is humility. The Apostle Paul saw that very clearly.

Gaining victory over Peer Fear begins by seeing **pride** as the root of this fear. Pride is the core of many of the sins that we commit, and it is certainly at the core of living our lives dictated by what others might think of us. Pride is the major reason we obsess over what other people think of us. Pride is the reason we allow others to control our actions. Pride is the reason we are filled with peer fear. We feel that we have a certain image to maintain. We want others to think highly of us. We would be too embarrassed not to be accepted by the group.

The Apostle Paul looked at the example of the Lord Jesus Christ and he saw His God as not being so proud that He would not take upon Himself the most humbling experience that we can imagine— joining a sinful human race as one of its poorest members. God was willing to do this because He had a mission to accomplish. Christ’s example influenced the way Paul looked at his own state of humiliation. Being in jail is a humbling experience. But Paul had a mission to accomplish and he saw how even his imprisonment was working to accomplish that mission. Roman prison guards were coming to Christ, the gospel was being preached more fearlessly, and even though some were proclaiming the truth out of spite to Paul which is difficult for us to even comprehend, the message was going forth so Paul rejoiced.

Andy Entwistle was getting prepared for what he considered to be the biggest day in his young life. He was preparing to be commissioned as a second lieutenant through the ROTC program at Northeastern University in Boston. The ceremony was scheduled for Saturday, so Andy had waited until Friday to get his hair cut so that he would look his sharpest. But when he went to the barber shop that he regularly patronized, the sign in the window informed him that the shop was closed, his barber had taken the day off for a long weekend. Now he was stuck. What was he going to do? He had to have his hair cut for the next day’s ceremony so that he would look his sharpest. Leafing through the yellow pages, Andy found another barber shop a couple of blocks away. As he walked through the door, he saw the lone barber sitting in a chair, reading the paper. The spry, smallish man sprang to his feet with the invitation, *you’re next*. As Andy sat down he noticed that the chair felt warm indicating that the barber had probably been sitting there alone for a long time. *This is a bad sign*, Andy thought. As the barber shook out the covering sheet with a snap and then draped it around him, Andy gave his orders, *a nice, short taper. Keep the back and sides pretty close, but leave a little more on top. Not enough to have a part though, okay?* Andy thought unhappily, *my own barber wouldn’t have to ask and I wouldn’t have to worry. Now I wonder if I’m going to look sharp enough for my commissioning tomorrow or if I’m going to be embarrassed in front of my fellow soldiers.*

*You’ve got it*, the barber answered back cheerfully. *You must be in the Army or Marines.*

*Army*, Andy replied back curtly. The clipper blade was now warm against the side of Andy’s head. He could tell by the way it felt that the barber was taking it down short enough. *Are you on leave?* The barber asked just wanting to make conversation. *No, I’m not stationed anywhere yet*, Andy answered. *I’ll be reporting to Fort Bragg next week. Tomorrow, I’m being commissioned as a second lieutenant.* Andy felt some pride coming into his voice.

*Oh, what do you know – a shave-tail? Boy do I remember you guys, always catching me doing something I wasn’t supposed to do. I was in the Army for a few years myself, you know, during World War 2,* the barber answered back and Andy was instantly sorry that he had continued the conversation. Andy wanted

to jump down from the chair and run. What had he gotten himself into? Here he was on the eve of one of the most important days of his life and he was having his hair cut by some career-private with an ax to grind against officers. *So you're being commissioned tomorrow*, the barber continued. *That's really something. Who's going to pin on your bars, your folks, right? They probably got a general or something coming to talk to you, I imagine.*

That last comment caught Andy off guard so he answered with more than a simple nod. *As a matter of fact, General Tuck is coming down from Fort Devens to give us a pep talk and hand out commissions.*

*Yah, I know General Tuck*, the barber agreed. *He's a one star, right? In fact, I met him just a couple of weeks ago.*

*You did?* Andy exclaimed incredulously. *Yah*, the barber continued. *He gave me this.* And with those words, the barber set down his clippers and went over to a drawer. He pulled out a box on which the words were engraved, *Bronze Star Medal.*

At Andy's request, the barber then told him his story. In February of 1945, a rifle platoon was stalled in its attempt to capture a small German town. The soldiers were nearly out of ammunition and were becoming very vulnerable. As night was falling, Corporal Dominic Cerutti volunteered to crawl across ground that was exposed to enemy fire to the company's headquarters in order to bring more ammunition. Despite being fired on continuously, he made the trip successfully and the rifle platoon was able to advance. For his valor, Corporal Cerutti was awarded the Bronze Star Medal. But he wanted to get back home to his wife and child so badly that he left after the war ended before the medal could be officially awarded. 40 years later, his son-in-law had contacted the Army and told them of Cerutti's location. Just several weeks ago, General Tucker had awarded the medal in a ceremony.

According to Andy's own testimony, that haircut received that Friday afternoon changed his whole outlook on his military career. Here he had been so concerned about how he would look before his peers as he attended his own commissioning ceremony to start his own military career that he had initially disdained the real, proven hero who was patiently and humbly serving him by cutting his hair. Andy testifies today that it was at this time in that barber chair that he learned what real military service was all about.

As Christians, we are all called to military service. We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces in heavenly places according to the words of the Apostle Paul. How inconsistent it is for us as foot soldiers to be so concerned about what others think about us when our command-in-chief, the Lord Jesus Christ, has already modeled the humility of leaving His home in heaven and taking upon Himself the life of a servant here on this earth.

Paul admonished us to have the same attitude that our commander-in-chief had. If we maintain this same attitude, we will never have to worry about being enslaved by peer fear.