

“Let’s learn to fear!” 1Co 10:1-13

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Today for our meditation we have these challenging words of Paul the apostle from his letter to Christians in Corinth. I would like to begin with a question – do you know what attitude we are commanded to have towards our God the most often in the Bible?

Popular guess would be “to love you God”. In fact, it is something else. “To fear the Lord your God” appear much more often. For us it shouldn’t be such a surprise, for even in our Catechism the explanation of every commandment begins with the words “we should ... fear and love God so that...”.

Today I would like to reflect together with you – is there a room for “fear of the Lord” in our Christian lives today, in 21st century Australia? And I will try to make a Biblical case that, indeed, this is what we all need at least a bit more, and I will go even further – I will argue that this command to fear the Lord your God is one more expression of God’s grace.

And surely, we would have heard arguments against the fear of the Lord. Sometimes even Christians compare the Old Testament and the New Testament, saying that the OT God was angry and scary and unpredictable, but Jesus is loving and gentle and wouldn’t say a harsh word to anyone.

He wouldn’t demand anything, at least not anything that we wouldn’t like, He wouldn’t prohibit anything, at least not the things that our hearts desire. And, of course, many would prefer to deal with this caricature of Jesus. We can observe this trend where people really want to make Jesus like one of us, our cool and awesome buddy Jesus. And we can hear these different slogans that Jesus and

the Gospel gives us freedom and we don't need to fear anything anymore. Our holy God including. Love drives away all fear and if only we claim to have love, we can basically do whatever suits us.

Then the idea "we don't need to fear God only to love Him", soon leads to "we don't need to respect our God", which leads to "we actually need to love ourselves" and "God is supposed to love us". And if He is too demanding, then I don't need such a god. Sadly, but it's not rare to witness such attitudes among self-identified Christians. And where are we on this spectrum?

But what does the Bible teach us about the fear of the Lord? And how could we see the command to fear the Lord as an expression of God's grace? There are a lot of warnings in the Bible, both in the Old and in the New Testament.

And these warnings reveal us something about our God. Unfortunately, too often we draw wrong conclusions. That this God is angry, and vengeful, not the most attractive person we could think of. We tend to get it wrong.

The command "to fear the Lord your God" is given by our gracious God to help us and to empower us to stand against all false gods and ideas and every sort of temptation. The truth is that we all fear something of someone.

If we boil it down, we fear either God or we fear men. If we fear God, we try listen to Him, and we try to understand His wisdom and to obey what He has commanded, we try to avoid anything that may displease our God, for we fear to disappoint Him, just as beloved children fear to disappoint their loving parents.

If we fear men, then we do whatever others expect from us, whatever others consider as a norm, we do whatever it takes to fit in, even if we clearly know that that is foolish and harmful for us and others, and will displease our Father who is in heaven.

Thus, we turn away from our God, and then we feel guilty before Him, then we don't want to listen to Him or be with Him anymore and thus our fear of men drives us away from our gracious God and leads us into destruction.

This is what our loving Father wants to prevent by commanding to fear Him. This is why Jesus says: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Mat 10:28)

Now, let's listen how our God Himself spells out what His attitude towards us is in the famous verses from Exodus: "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands..."

... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but – who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exo 34:6-7)

What jumps out of the text? Quite often it is this, – He will “visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children... to the third and the fourth generation...” How does that sound? Harsh? What about caring and gracious?

First, we need to notice that our gracious God promises His steadfast love, forgiveness and faithfulness to the thousands’ generation to those who love Him. To the thousands’... That is basically forever. To those who love Him.

Meaning, no conditions, no requirements, no merits needed. Just willingness and humility to receive His gifts of forgiveness and eternal life and to respond to His call. But then we can see that He also cares also for those who hate Him.

This is why He issues this warning that also contains invitation. “If you hate me, and if your children hate me, and grandchildren, then they won’t be able to receive my blessings, they will receive what they have chosen.”

“Therefore, return to me and receive my steadfast love and faithfulness”! Or as we heard it read from Isaiah: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” (Isa 55:7) This is what our gracious Father desires for everyone.

In the Old Testament there are these numerous warnings about the exile. God had just rescued His “firstborn son” Israel from slavery to Egyptians, and He warns them not to follow others gods... for they will destroy them.

He graciously keeps warning them for almost nine centuries [!] ... only then they finally received what they themselves had chosen. The exile. Because they had stopped fearing the Lord their God, and had fallen prey to their idols.

We have warnings in the New Testament as well. The scariest and the most unpleasant of them are warnings about hell. Who would say such things? Who would use such unloving words?

Do you know who is the only person in the New Testament who threatens with hell? Can you guess? The only one who knows what exactly is to going happen on the Last Day. The same one who didn’t consider His own life too high a price to pay so that only He could save us from hell, – Jesus, our Savior.

And today we read also Paul’s warnings. There is something that makes Paul’s warning very uncomfortable. He makes these parallels between Israelites and Christians. Paul says that Israelites were baptized. As are Christians. Israelites ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink. As do Christians. Israelites were accompanied by Christ. As are Christians.

But regardless of the grace that they had received, and continued to receive, vast majority of them displeased God. They didn’t fear the Lord their gracious God, they turned to adultery, they worshipped idols, they tested the Lord.

And all of this was done by people who had witnessed God's mighty actions in Egypt, they had witnessed God destroying Egyptian army, they had witnessed God in the pillar of cloud and fire accompanying them days and nights.

Still they didn't listen to God, didn't fear Him, turned away and were destroyed. "Now [as Paul says] these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were...

We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did ... We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed ... Now these things ... were written down for our instruction." See grace and more grace.

Even these tragic events our God uses for our benefit, so that we can learn to fear Him and to avoid our destruction. For He cares for us and He desires that everyone is saved. Today there are so many who are baptized, confirmed, who have even received the Holy Communion, but have lost their way.

Often because of the same reasons as Israelites. Idolatry is one. Who do we fear and love and trust in above all things? Is it our Father in heaven? Do we expect all good from Him? Do we run to Him in all troubles?

Is it our God who determines who we are, our identity, or something else – our work, achievements, callings, relationships? What gives us security for future – our Father or our possessions and savings?

Who or what fills our lives with meaning and joy? Is it our God, is it following Jesus or something else? What determines what we believe – is it the Word of God, or our feelings and preferences?

Adultery is another one. It has become a norm. Often even among Christians. Sex without marriage. Living together. Pornography. Our culture has embraced these things, and often we too. Somehow, we have persuaded ourselves that God should be fine with our sins, and that His clear warnings don't apply to us.

Testing of God. You can hear people testing God by insisting that "they are saved by grace alone", that that is God's business to save them, that they believe that there is a god and that he forgives... and that that's enough, even as they ignore the Triune God and reject His messengers.

Paul writes these words of warning to those who self-identify as Christians. To us. Before we arrived in Barossa, we receive some information about Tanunda. It was told that around half of people self-identify as Lutherans. Wow!

That would make 2400 Lutherans in Tanunda. But according to the LCA statistics, we barely make 25% of those numbers. What about the others? How much would they benefit from this gracious command "fear of the Lord"!

And how much can we benefit from it! Paul says: "**Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.**" This is our gracious God speaking to us. For He knows how weak we are. He knows that without Him we can do nothing.

He knows how little it takes for us to fall. Sometimes it feels like we are always on the edge, on the tipping point, – if we fear the Lord, then by His grace we remain standing, if not... we fall.

It is only a little step and ... then I fail in my vocations – as a husband, as a father, as a pastor. Then I fail to provide the support that my wife needs, I fail to provide teaching and encouragement that my children need. Without God's grace I am unable to write a sermon and to lead a Bible study.

And there is no much space between standing and falling. I am still a young Christian, but even I have witnessed how little this space is. I have seen my brothers in Christ and ministry fall, because of adultery, because they stopped fearing God and instead of being faithful, tried to test Him. It doesn't take much.

This is why we often pray for pastors and for our Church leaders. That by God's grace we would continue to fear our Lord and would remain standing. It is not an easy road, it is the narrow one, and we need all the help to be able to walk it.

We won't escape temptations and trials. None of us will. We won't escape our crosses. But what Paul assures us is that our God is faithful. He won't let you be tempted beyond your ability. Meaning, He will always be with you and He will set the boundary that the evil one will not be able to cross.

More, where there is a temptation, He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. Wherever there is darkness, He will provide light. And one of ways our loving Father supports us and helps us is by reminding that we are "to fear Him and to love and trust in Him above all things".

And as we try, enabled and supported by the Holy Spirit, our Father remains "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping His steadfast love for thousands", for you who love Him.

Let's learn to fear our loving Father so that by His grace we may stand.

Amen.