

LIKE JESUS - 5

Jesus is reassuring people, comforting them (*comfortes* = to strengthen). He is telling them they do not need to be afraid. And yet: Their priests are corrupt. Their king is a moral, spiritual, and Jewish disgrace. Many of them have concluded that the temple in Jerusalem has become a charade, a mere monument to a former age, and is being run by men who care more about greed and politics than about God. They are an occupied country, with Roman soldiers in control. Most of them have friends and relatives who have been killed or ruined at the whim of those in power, and there is no recourse. Some of them don't know where their next meal is coming from. None of them have any confidence that, by hard work and responsible living, they will be able to build security, prosperity, or any kind of decent lives for their children.

But Jesus is telling them: "Be bold. Do not worry. Have no fear. Never mind all the problems you focused on before you met me. Carry the message. Tell people about a new kind of LIFE. Live and act and speak in calm confidence." Have no fear? What's going on here?

Soon Jesus will be dead. In less than forty years, most of those listening to Jesus will be dead. All but one of The Twelve will have died a martyr's death. Paul will have been executed; Peter crucified upside down; James, the brother of Jesus, thrown from the temple parapet to his death (the third wilderness temptation has Satan daring Jesus to throw Himself from this same pinnacle; according to Eusebius, James was still alive after the fall, praying for his enemies until they first stoned him and then clubbed him to death). But have no fear! Hundreds of thousands of Jews will be slaughtered by Vespasian's army, and then his son Titus will take over. (Would you rather meet the son of Vespasian, or the Son of God?) Jerusalem will be destroyed, the temple will be torn down, and there will be no Jewish state on the face of the earth for nearly the next nineteen hundred years. But this Jewish carpenter says to His Jewish friends and followers: "Have no fear!" Excuse me? What's going on here? Did I miss something?

This is not the only time Jesus talks like this. In Matthew 14:26 and Mark 6:50, Jesus comes to the disciples across the water, and at first they are terrified. "*Take heart, it is I; have no fear.*" Every time you pray, is that the first thing you hear Jesus saying as He comes to you? "*Take heart, it is I; have no fear.*" If that is not the first thing we hear,

we probably don't get any of the rest of it very straight. Fear corrupts everything it touches. "Fear is the mind killer." (*Dune*, Frank Herbert) Fear is the LIFE-destroyer. Fear and loneliness are Satan's greatest tools. Of course, Satan also lies a lot. But he lies to make us more afraid and lonely and discouraged and depressed. There is almost no damage we won't do if we get afraid and lonely enough.

Most of us have pretty clear memories of times we have let fear talk us out of good things, and destroy or warp events and seasons that were full of promise - times we let fear talk us out of being who we really are, and out of doing things we should have done and wanted very much to do. And fear also talks us *into* doing things we shouldn't do, and would never dream of doing in our right minds. And behind the clear memories, are there not pools of dread in the mists and shadows of the mind - things that keep us vaguely uneasy but that we hope will just stay hidden and leave us alone? Fear kills LIFE. Fear is the mortal enemy of faith, and it is the inevitable telltale mark of the ways and places where we have not yet learned to trust God. It is said that "*perfect love casts out fear.*" (I John 4:18) In Christ Jesus, God reveals a perfect LOVE for us. But all our lives here, we struggle to believe it. And the level of our fear shows us how far we have come, in our pilgrimage, to trust and believe it.

We would be here the rest of the day if I tried to describe all the incidents in which Jesus tries to kill fear. He heals the Gerazene demoniac, and the people are filled with fear. He tries to call Simon Peter, but first He has to deal with Peter's fear: "*Do not be afraid.*" (Luke 5:10) Jairus' daughter is deathly ill and Jesus wants to heal her, but first He has to break the fear pattern: "*Do not fear; only believe, and she shall be well.*" (Luke 8:50) Of course, Jesus is just making noise; it's just filler, an idle comment. No need to pay attention. No reason to believe Jesus and know that if Jairus had not listened to instructions and turned from fear to trust, his daughter would have been dead that night. Jesus is running into too much interference: "Jairus, I can help, but you have to stop sending all these waves of fear." (You think sunspots cause communication static? They're nothing in comparison to fear.)

All through the story, we hear Jesus trying to get through to us: "*Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.*" "*Fear not, you are of more value than many sparrows.*" "*Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the*

kingdom.” “Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?” “So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.” “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4; Matthew 10:31; Luke 12:7; Luke 12:32; Matthew 8:26; Matthew 25:25; Matthew 28:10; John 14:27)

The fact is that from one end of the Gospels to the other, Jesus is fighting fear. Everywhere He goes, everything He does - always it is surrounded by fear, and He is constantly telling His followers to give up their fear. It is killing LIFE ... killing the Kingdom ... interfering with His power and purpose. It is the most frequent teaching, instruction, and command we have from the One we call our Lord and Savior: DO NOT BE AFRAID. HAVE NO FEAR. FEAR NOT. *“It is I; have no fear.”*

I hope you will leave here today with that phrase burned into your memory, branded on your hearts, blazing in your minds - until you can never think of Jesus again for as long as you live without hearing Him say, *“It is I; have no fear.”*

We think that fear is our friend. We think that fear will save us. We think it’s a barrier against our evil. If we are afraid of the consequences of doing wrong, maybe it will prevent us from doing evil, and help us to do good. How has that been working for us?

We think fear is an early-warning system. It helps us to work harder, stop at stoplights, remember anniversaries - to show up at the right time, for the right reason, with the right attitude. How has that been working for us?

We also think fear is the glue that keeps community and nation together, and drives us toward survival and success. Fear builds churches, pays taxes, curtails adultery, discourages stealing and murder and sloth. How has that been working for us? Never mind Heaven, love, truth, or things we might really value; if you don’t shape up and do what we tell you, you’re going to go straight to Hell.

More and more, I realize that the mindset of the New Testament was nearly the opposite of what most people think today. Conversion - waking up to the LIFE of the Spirit - was also waking up to the bondage we are currently under, realizing the extent to which we are slaves to the

brokenness and alienation and fear of Satan's rule. So many religious people today are worried that some day they might be thrown into Hell. But the New Testament is trying to reveal a WAY of Life that gets us out of bondage *now* - out of the Hell we are in *now*. The classic creed of the early church was that Jesus saves us from "sin, death, and the devil." They didn't mean in some future time, in case we were ever bad enough or unfortunate enough to encounter these possible, future enemies. They meant *now*. We are already in bondage, and Jesus comes to free us. Jesus says point-blank: "If you don't recognize your situation, if you don't know how sick and hopeless things are at present, then we have nothing to say or to do with each other." (Matthew 9:12-13) Christianity is not about *staying* out of Hell - it's about *getting* out of Hell! All the greed, anger, jealousy, pride, lust, and envy aren't as easy to shake as we used to think when we were young. In fact, by ourselves, there is no way we will ever be free. IT TAKES A SAVIOR. And the first thing the Savior always says to us is: "We have to cut the fear. You must learn to trust me so much that you can begin to let go of your fear. Otherwise, you simply will not be able to follow me."

We can barely imagine ourselves (never mind the whole world) changing our entire *modus operandi* - our entire attitude, our entire belief structure - from fear to faith. It is, nevertheless, what Jesus is asking: conversion = New LIFE = New Kingdom = new wine in new wine skins = a Kingdom not of this world. One of the many ways to see the dynamism and newness of what Jesus came to bring us and invite us into can be seen in the switch from fear to FAITH. What other motive could we live by - survive on - if suddenly all the fear were gone from our lives?

At first we gasp, and think it wouldn't be possible to survive here. Love is so powerless, caring so anemic, motives so mixed (in our experience here) that at first we cannot imagine life unmotivated by fear. Could love and peace make us stop at stop signs? Could love and peace make us work hard to achieve and accomplish all that the gifts and guidance of our God asks of us? Could love make us save up for college educations? Could love keep us faithful to our spouses; keep us from stealing from our neighbors; keep us patriotic, and moral, and responsible ... without any fear involved whatsoever? Well ... YES! Genuine love could do all those things - deeper, stronger, more patiently, and more consistently than any "fear" ever imagined. IF we could ever find and trust real LOVE.

Gospel has always called us beyond Law, always told us that if we give up fear - the base from which all Law works - and turn in trust to the God who loves us, we will come into the presence of God above Law (higher than its requirements), not below Law (doing less than the Law demands). Then we would live in joy, in peace, in calmness, in trust. And our lives would be transformed. How surprising to realize more and more that this is what Jesus is constantly saying to us, trying to reveal to us, trying to call us into. A very different LIFE, lived for very different reasons, based on very different principles. But we have to turn from fear - all of it. Fear will always be around, will always be available in this world. But we can turn from it, refuse to let it be our motive - refuse to let it control us, direct our steps, make our decisions, guide our lives. Only, we cannot just do that by our own personal power or personal intention. That goes to the worst evil - to Nietzsche, Nazism, Stalin, and all the meanest bastards the world has ever known - trying to overcome fear by making others afraid, as if loading enough fear onto others will eventually make us immune to fear ourselves.

But most of us aren't Great Sinners, any more than we are Great Saints. We just decide to keep the useful parts of our fear, and mix that with some of the love we also want in our lives. Of course, half of both is neither. It's the Twilight Zone, purgatory, halfway between God and Satan - it's the broken realm we live in. Fear and faith do not mix and mingle. Love is not willing to settle for half of us. Sooner or later, we are forced to choose: Fear or FAITH. Trust God, or stay in the half-life that gets sucked toward darkness. Now *that* is a frightening thought. But the truth is (at least it has always been true so far), I cannot use fear to propel me toward love. I cannot fear darkness enough to make me choose light. Only if I feel God's love, and see the light, can I move toward it. And any way that I fear the darkness, no matter how logical or wise, only draws me toward the darkness.

We think fear is our friend, but what is the single greatest barrier between us and God? Or even between us and the LIFE Jesus invites us into, and tries to set before us? My greatest fear at the moment is that I will run out of time before I get all the way through this sermon. But just one illustration:

For years and years, I have attended Bible study groups that wrestled with Jesus' teachings. Over and over, through all those years, I have watched group after group come up against the precepts of Jesus: "*Turn the other cheek.*" "*Love your enemies.*" "*Take the speck out of*

your own eye” instead of blaming or hating others for all that is wrong. Trust God. Turn will and life over to the Holy Spirit. Be willing to lose your life for my sake. Come follow me.

All through the years, I’ve heard very intelligent, highly caring, and devoted people – most of them sincere Christians and church members – talk about how hard it is to live by these precepts, how impossible it is. And I agree with everything they say. It looks just as difficult to me as it does to them. But what is the common thread running through all our objections and arguments? FEAR: Jesus, you are trying to take away our fear. You are suggesting we can live without our fear. You are saying that our fear doesn’t matter, or at least that it’s not important enough to keep us from living for the Kingdom, living for our God. We cannot imagine such a thing. There really are people and forces around us trying to do us damage. We need our fear to protect us from them. We cannot imagine giving up all of our fear. We could maybe live the WAY You are asking us to, except for our FEAR. We know what the world is like. We know what some of the other people are like. We are afraid *Your* WAY won’t work here. We are afraid, period.

And Jesus replies, in many ways, in many passages, and finally with His own life: I know what the world is like, at least as well as you do. I know what other people are like, at least as much as you do. But if you will not give up your fear, you cannot follow me – you cannot be my disciples, you cannot live for me or my Kingdom.

“Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?’” (Matthew 16:24-26; see also Luke 14:25-35; Matthew 10:34-39; Mark 8:34-37)

Why is this passage so hard to hear? Because it is asking us to give up our fear.

Jesus is called “Son of David.” He was of David’s line. Messiah, everyone knew, would be a direct descendant of David because David was Israel’s greatest King. David was, within the context of his time, a truly amazing king, almost beyond belief. Before that, and woven into it, David was one of the world’s most amazing warriors. Goliath was only the beginning. David inspired such courage and devotion in

his men that his armies became invincible. He fought all of his life and never lost a single battle. People knew God was with him because no other explanation would suffice for his incredible feats. But in his own right, in hand-to-hand combat, David was pure, lethal magic. No one could stand against him. He killed so many men we cannot begin to keep track of it. From the brink of extinction, David brought his people into the only Golden Age of prosperity and prominence that Israel has ever known. He was the fabled King Arthur in real life, and he captured Jerusalem and turned it into Camelot. It was completely and totally impossible, but David did it anyway. Cyrus, Asoka, Hezekiah, Josiah, and Constantine were very spiritual and religious kings, but no human king was ever more religious than David.

So what of David's Son? Jesus killed no one. In fact, He preferred dying to killing - even at extreme personal expense. This we all know, and frequently forget. And though Jesus reportedly has more followers than His famous ancestor, it is hard not to suspect that, in reality, our world still admires the way of David more than the WAY of Jesus.

Jesus, we know, admired and honored His tradition. He learned from the heroes who came before Him, and He incorporated many things from the prophets and patriarchs and kings, turning the best of it into something very new, along with the genius and Spirit that He Himself brought to it all. What do the two kings have in common, this King of Israel and this "great David's greater son" - the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Two Kings: Both charismatic, beyond language to describe. Both immensely caught up in what they believed Yahweh wanted. Similar and inescapably connected, though dimensionally as different as night and day. Yet they were both amazingly humble, and they were both FEARLESS. What is the motto of King David's life? "*I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.*" (Psalm 23:4) No man could fight as David fought unless that were his truth.

Jesus added many dimensions to this "fear not." He feared neither death nor life. He did not fear poverty, or disease. He was not afraid to offend rulers, priests, kings, scholars, or friends - not Caesar himself, or even His own mother. He faced Satan, the threat of Hell, and the prospect of torture and death on a cross. Be clear: Both men knew fear. But fear could not control them. Fear was given no authority in their lives, no veto power, no place in the counsel chambers of their minds. How does a shepherd boy face Goliath? You listen to your God, instead of to your fear. How does a man face a cross?

If you are a Christian - that is, if you have been baptized, drowned, converted; if you have died to the old ways of this world and been raised to newness of LIFE in Christ Jesus; if you have sworn allegiance to a New King, whose Kingdom is not of this world - if you are a Christian, what is the one thing we should be able to expect and predict of you, above and beyond all other things? THAT YOU ARE FEARLESS! That you are no longer controlled by any threat, fear, bribe, or pressure this world can bring to bear. That was, in fact, the mark of a great many of the followers we call the “early church.” They were the *ecclesia* - the people of Jesus. And they were His fearless followers, unafraid to follow Him into new ways, new allegiances, new possibilities, new customs - and yes, into danger, anger, persecution, torture, and even death.

If you are a Christian, we cannot expect you to be right all the time, or good all the time, or pleasant or well-mannered or even well-behaved. After all, we are a fellowship of sinners. But do we not have a right to expect you to be fearless? What does it mean to follow the Fearless One, who constantly tells His followers, “*Be not afraid. It is I, have no fear*”?

So let me ask you: When you think of the Christian church today - when you think of Christians - is that the first thing that leaps to your mind? Is that your experience, your observation, your own involvement with the Jesus People? Is that what you thought, with a smile on your face, as you walked in here this morning? “Ah, this morning I will be in the midst of a fearless people. Here are the followers of Jesus - unafraid of this world, or anything in it. Unafraid of sin, death, Satan, Hell, or the Law.” I just named the things our ancestors said Jesus saved us from, didn't I? Are you saved? Being saved has nothing to do with some picayune little formula about religious smugness or in-group acceptance. “Are you saved?” means “Are you fearless?” Have you turned your life over to Jesus - let Him take away your fear - so you can live the LIFE He invites you into?

It is not okay to live cut-back, shy, mousy, play-it-safe, never-displease-anybody-or-cause-any-trouble kinds of lives ... not in the name of Jesus the Christ. If we make mistakes, screw up, do damage, feel terrible about decisions or failure or things we should have done but failed to do ... that's easy; we know where to get forgiveness and new chances if we really mean it. But if we will not go fearless, what can Jesus do with us? Every time He gets us near to something important or meaningful or about to break into our true purpose, fear will step in and take it all back down. Satan will see to it. That's his job.

How dare we call ourselves Christians if we still walk in fear! Keep praying - keep inviting Him in. And every time He comes, listen for the very first thing He says to you: *“It is I; have no fear.”*

PRAYER

Infinite One, even if by Your love we learn to fear no evil, yet there are other things to fear. At least they strike us dumb with awe and reverence. Evil is shallow, but goodness and mercy and grace and eternal possibilities ... such mysteries do not fit into our finite brains and hearts. How can You love us so much? *Why* would You love us so much?

And maybe it isn't quite the same as fear, but what if we never learn to honor the LIFE You have given us, or respond to the endless caring and guidance and forgiveness You keep sending our way? “Surely goodness and mercy” have followed us ... and continually follow us. Clearly it is flat-out beyond our comprehension. And yet some days we still wake up not expecting this to go on happening ... not expecting that You will still be with us ... not depending upon You to go on loving, forgiving, guiding, and blessing us. What a wretched lack of appreciation and trust is that?! Yet how can we presume so much, with no way to earn it, deserve it, or ever repay You? O God, Your TRUTH is so far beyond anything we have ever experienced. How can we get used to such awesome dimensions of LIFE and LOVE?

But since You won't abandon us, we're just going to have to learn to live with it - a little more each day, one day at a time. We will remember You more often. We will learn to fear evil less and less. We will adore and trust and obey You with more joy and allegiance each day. We will believe the unbelievable: that You truly love us. And we will follow our Lord - Your Christ - with more devotion each step of the WAY ... for YOU are with us. Amen.