

“Irreverence”
Proverbs 1:7
April 26, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

We are beginning a new sermon series today, one I am calling “The Little Sins of Proverbs.” You need to understand right off the bat that I don’t believe there really is any such thing as a little sin. Any sin committed against a holy God is a monstrous evil, simply because of the significance of God’s holiness. But there are sins that are commonly regarded as little. While reading through the book of Proverbs recently, I was struck by the number of sins that fit in this category of being popularly regarded as little sins, while actually being big sins. It is these sins that I want us to look at over the next four months.

The sin we are going to start with today surfaces right here in the first chapter—the sin of irreverence. It is the sin of not fearing God, contrary to the counsel of verse 7. **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”** Very few people are bothered by irreverence today, with everyone seeing it as no big issue at all. Consider, for example, the common practice of taking the Lord’s name in vain, a clear violation of the third commandment. This sin occurs when we speak God’s name without showing respect to him. So on those reality television shows where part of someone’s house is improved, and at the reveal the beneficiary of this effort says over and over again, “O my God!” we see a common example of irreverence. Most people would say, “But that’s such a minor thing, they didn’t mean anything by it.” That’s precisely the problem. They spoke the name of God without meaning anything by it. That is exactly what it means to take the Lord’s name in vain.

So what I would like for us to do today is to look at this sin of irreverence by looking at the positive quality urged upon us in verse 7. Notice two things about the fear of the Lord.

I. The Attractiveness of the Fear of the Lord

One of the reasons irreverence is so commonplace in our world is that having a reverent heart is viewed negatively. It is viewed as irrelevant and boring by many and even dangerous by some. So the first thing we need before we can learn to have reverent hearts is to appreciate the beauty of the fear of the Lord. And like anything else, before we can appreciate it, we must understand it.

So what does it mean to fear the Lord? The word “fear” teaches us two things very clearly. Fear is the most powerful motivator among human

emotions. The adrenal gland goes into action and releases adrenaline into the bloodstream to prepare the body for intense action. Someone left a 12 inch rubber snake inside the church this week, and two ladies saw it and responded with fear. They were motivated for action, including some screams and some evasive actions as they moved away from it as quickly as possible. The fear of the Lord motivates us for action. Fear is also internal, happening inside of us. It usually leads to some visible action, but always begins as an internal motivation.

To say that the fear of the Lord is to be an internal motivator may be helpful, but it doesn't really tell us what the fear of the Lord really is. Let me take a stab at that in this way. To fear the Lord is to have an encounter with the true God that leads us to stop trifling with him. Let me say the same thing from the negative side. We become irreverent when we push God to the margins of our lives. To know the true God is to give him a weighty presence in our lives. If an angry rhinoceros were to come crashing through the front door of the church and charge down the aisle looking to apply his horn to the mid-sections of as many people as possible, none of us would dare trivialize the rhino. We would not sit calmly in our pews as if rhinos running through churches happened on a regular basis. We would fear the rhino as a result of our direct encounter with him.

This analogy of the rhinoceros illustrates well this one aspect of the fear of the Lord, by which we stop trivializing him and pushing him to the margins. But in another aspect, it completely misses the mark. An appropriate response to the rhino would be terror, but the fear of the Lord is not terror. To the contrary, the true fear of the Lord draws us closer to God rather than making us want to run away from him. To fear God is to have an encounter with him that results in allowing him to have a weighty presence in our lives. Let me give another illustration. One way to think about marriage is to think of it as an encounter with a real person that leaves your life permanently changed. Things began to change with me during my engagement to Wendy. Furniture that I had been using in my apartment was given away. New clothes were bought to the point that within a few months of marriage, all of my former furniture and clothes were no longer under our roof. My time schedule changed, so that I always had to consider Wendy's needs and schedule when planning what I would do. She became a weighty person in my life (metaphorically, not literally), and it was glorious. That's what the fear of God means. It means to have an encounter with God so that he becomes weighty in your life, and nothing is ever the same again.

What advantage is gained by giving to God such a weighty presence in one's life? One of them is found right here in our verse. **"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."** The word *beginning* could be understood in two different ways. It could mean a stage that one passes through and leaves behind, as in the *beginning* of the journey. Or it could mean a foundational

principle, as in learning to read by beginning with one's ABC's. It is this second sense that is meant in 1:7. The fear of the Lord is foundational to the kind of life urged upon us in the book of Proverbs, a life that flourishes in every way. Let me mention just two ways that the fear of the Lord leads to a flourishing life. It gives us both courage and character.

The fear of the Lord gives us courage. Proverbs 14:26 says, **“In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence.”** Proverbs 28:1 says, **“The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.”** Like you, I have known people who are full of irrational fears. They imagine threats that rarely amount to anything, and then flee from those imagined threats. Parents imagine the world to be overly dangerous, and then flee by becoming overly-protective of their children. The righteous, those who fear the Lord, respond with boldness to real threats. You will know you are growing in the fear of the Lord as other fears begin to grow smaller.

The benefit of fearing God that I want to spend most of our time on is this second benefit of strong character. Proverbs 16:6 says, **“By the fear of the Lord one turns away from evil.”** When we have an encounter with God so that he becomes a weighty presence in our lives, we don't need external restraints in order to do the right thing. Character is most clearly revealed when all the external restraints are removed, and the person still does the right thing. Proverbs 24:12 says, **“If you say, ‘Behold, we did not know this,’ does not he who weights the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work?”** He is addressing one of the most common lies spoken to excuse bad behavior. “I didn't know I was supposed to declare that as income.” “No one ever told me that the paper was due today.” These kinds of excuses easily roll off our tongues, and there is only one thing powerful enough to stop them. There is a God who is so great that he knows our hearts more accurately than we know them ourselves. And he is the one to whom we will have to give an account. God knows all, and he is the judge. If we believe that, it will produce in us the character of doing the right thing even when no one is looking.

Why is it a good thing to be a man or woman of character? In order to answer that question, it is important to see something else in the book of Proverbs, and actually throughout the Bible. If you've read the Bible very much, you will know that a common metaphor for our lives is that of a walk. For example, the wisdom writer warns his son about the dangers of bad companions: **“Do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths”** (1:15). Walking is simply a series of steps, none of which get you very far by themselves. But if you string enough of them together, you will cover a great distance. Here's what that means in the book of Proverbs: the catastrophic things that ruin people's lives start with very small compromises. The fool is presented to us in many different arenas as simply the person who begins by making small compromises. He just takes a step in the wrong

direction, which seems very small at the time, but then launches him on a path that leads to destruction. So the wisdom writer warns his own son about the adulteress: **“Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house”** (5:8). And the comically sad picture of the sluggard portrays him as making very small concessions. **“A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest”** (6:10). A small compromise launches a person on a path that leads to disaster.

What is true of individuals is also true of larger communities and nations. A growing number of economists are beginning to see that the roots of our current economic troubles are character issues. Economies require trust in order to function properly. You won't put your money on deposit in a bank unless you trust that there is a high likelihood that you will be able to get it back when you ask for it. Banks won't lend it without the same trust of the borrower. But what we have seen recently is a massive failure to do the right thing, like honor one's promise to pay back the money that was borrowed. When enough people do that, it leads to massive economic disruption.

II. The Acquisition of the Fear of the Lord

The opening verses of chapter 2 speak directly to this question of how a person can acquire the fear of the Lord. Notice that these verses have an “If...then” structure. If a set of conditions is met, **“then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God”** (2:5). Several “if” statements in the first four verses describe these conditions to us. Let me summarize them under three points.

First, to acquire the fear of the Lord, we must pay careful attention to God's word. **“If you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you...”** (2:1). I like what Bruce Waltke says about this. “The first condition stipulates that the son become like Solomon's temple, whose inner sanctuary housed the word of God. Unlike pagan temples, which housed idols whom their worshipers manipulated by myth and ritual to attain life, in Solomon's temple and in the son's heart the Lord's transcendent moral will rules, and submitting to it issues into life.” Waltke is talking about the ark of the covenant, the central piece of furniture in the temple, located in the innermost court of the Holy of Holies. It contained the tables of the law given to Moses, as well as Aaron's rod that had supernaturally budded. If we are to learn to fear God, the word of God needs to be in that inner sanctuary of our lives. I want to invite you to join me this summer in a Bible memory program, memorizing and meditating on one verse each week from that week's sermon. I plan on printing the verse each week at the bottom of the sermon outline, and I would encourage you to take a small index card and write the verse on it and keep it with you and review it, meditate upon it and pray through it each week.

The second condition is to be willing to seek diligently this encounter with the true God that we said is the essence of learning the fear of the Lord. To seek something diligently means that you are willing to put up with some failure in its pursuit. Two images are used in verses three and four, the image of a man pursuing a woman, and that of someone searching for buried treasure. The verb **“call out”** (v. 3) is commonly used for the calling out, the pursuing of a woman. That pursuit is sometimes met with disappointment, isn't it? The first time Wendy and I met, there was some interest on my part toward her. She was not so impressed with me. After her roommate lured Wendy to our church, based in part on her promise that there was this guy she wanted her to meet (me), she was disappointed after meeting me. Several months later, I invited her out, and she couldn't go because of a previous engagement. A couple of months after that, I invited her to go with me to our church picnic. She accepted, but as a result of a series of factors and some misunderstanding, she went home with another guy. But perseverance obviously paid off in this case. The next image of searching for hidden treasure teaches the same thing. Such a search includes far more time in not finding than in finding. If we are to learn to fear the Lord through an encounter with him through his word, we need to be prepared to keep searching through the times we don't find. It is unrealistic to expect to have a significant encounter with God through picking up the Bible and spending five minutes with it a couple of times a week.

Third, allegiance must precede understanding. The first “if” clause of these verses says, **“If you receive my words”** (2:1). The word *receive* indicates an acceptance or commitment to something that precedes the understanding of the “then” clause of verse 5 which promises understanding of the fear of the Lord. Commitment precedes knowing in most endeavors. The only way to learn how to ride a bicycle is to take the risk of committing oneself to balancing on two wheels. You can't get to the fear of God from the outside looking in. It only comes to insiders who are ready to commit themselves fully to this God.

CONCLUSION:

The true fear of God can come only through faith in Jesus. Psalm 130:4 says, **“But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.”** The forgiveness we have is through faith in Jesus, and it is only as we receive this forgiveness that we can learn to fear God. Why is that? Because apart from this forgiveness, we would never come near to God. Our fear would be simply a terror that would turn us away from God, not toward him. But now we can draw near even while knowing that he is absolutely holy, because we see his smile upon us through Jesus. As we partake of the Lord's Supper today, let's commit ourselves again to God, seeing that through Jesus the scowl of judgment has been turned to the smile of forgiveness.