



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Fear of the Lord  
(Where Wisdom Is Found,  
pp. 11-18)

### What do you think?

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### Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
One Bear Place #97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-298-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

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# Fear of the Lord

Fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom. According to Scripture, the proper fear of God is also the end as part of the consummating gift of salvation. What kind of fear leads to wholeness, love, and freedom from self-indulgence, rather than groveling servitude?

### Prayer

Be our vision, High King of Heaven: we turn to you for wisdom on our way.

Inform our minds so that we may have the very mind of Christ: may we understand our place and our purpose in your world.

Help us in the power of your Holy Spirit to hear your true word to us and to respond in living worship to you.

Amen.

### Responsive Reading: Psalm 25:10-14

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

**For your name's sake, O LORD,  
pardon my guilt, for it is great.**

Who are they that fear the LORD?

He will teach them the way that they should choose.

**They will abide in prosperity,  
and their children shall possess the land.**

The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them.

### Reflection

Time and again the biblical sages teach, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10). Yet fear as a pathway to wise living and proper relationship with God seems to us both unattractive and mysterious. After all, we fear "whatever we feel has great power of destroying us, or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain," Aristotle observes. How can fear of God be central to the life of faith, which is meant to draw us closer to God in love?

Russell Reno explores the great paradox that "the covenant begun with Abraham and fulfilled in Christ both casts out and encourages fear." For those who love God fully, "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). Yet even Abraham, who in his faithfulness is "the father of all" believers (Romans 4:16), is commended for maturing into proper fear of God (Genesis 22:12). With this in mind, Reno concludes, we must avoid the temptation to think that fearing God is just a primitive form of piety or a symptom of immature faith.

In Scripture he finds implicit distinctions among three types of fear that play very different roles in faithful discipleship.

- ▶ *Worldly fear can diminish human life.* This "shrinking anxiety about the future" comes from realizing we can be destroyed by human sinfulness, powerful institutions, and natural processes beyond our control. Of course, we should plan our lives with care (Proverbs 8:12) and fear the legitimate power of authorities (Romans 13:3). But worldly fear too often "debilitates, paralyzes, and



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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undermines our faithfulness” and “the kind of justice that emerges out of trembling anxiety is outward and unstable.” For these reasons, worldly fear has no lasting place in God’s kingdom.

- ▶ *Spiritual fear of God’s judgment directs us away from sin and toward righteousness.* We should grieve over our sins. “If we tremble before the thought of final judgment (see Mark 13:32-37), we can better avoid transgression. In this way, a fear of divine punishment is pedagogical,” Reno notes. “This guiding fear, however, must come to an end after the faithful enter their reward, for they have attained righteousness and no longer need the pedagogical fear of punishment.”
- ▶ *A lasting, heavenly fear honors God’s holiness and love.* We rightly experience “a shrinking, repentant awe” in the presence of the transcendent God. As we die to our sinful selves, our “fear is less concerned with punishment and more concerned with purification,” Reno writes. “The eternal and unfathomable difference between God and creature explains the everlasting fear that is consistent with a love that draws us ever nearer.... Our confident faith in [Christ’s] saving death is entirely consistent with a fearful sense of the depths into which he went on our behalf, depths from which we turn away in shuddering, instinctive horror... As the old spiritual says of the cross, ‘it causes me to tremble, tremble.’”

### Study Questions

1. Discuss the difference between worldly fear and the two forms of spiritual fear that Reno mentions. What things do we most dread with worldly fear today? How can these worldly fears come to predominate over our spiritual lives?
2. How does Reno respond to the concern that fear of God’s punishment “corrupts a true faith” because it “casts doubt on God’s mercy” and “simply reflects a cowering, anxious hedonism that organizes commitments according to long-term calculations about pleasure and pain”?
3. Discuss the difference, according to Reno, between the spiritual fear of divine punishment and the lasting, heavenly fear of God.
4. What sort of fear is implicit in each of these passages: Genesis 22:12, Psalm 25:14, Psalm 111:10, and 1 John 4:18?

### Departing Hymn: “Be Thou My Vision” (vv. 1 and 2)

Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;  
naught be all else to me, save that thou art —  
thou my best thought, by day or by night,  
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my Wisdom, and thou my true Word;  
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;  
thou my great Father, I thy true son;  
thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

*Irish hymn, 8th century; translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880-1931); versed by Eleanor H. Hull (1860-1935)*

Tune: SLANE

# Fear of the Lord

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To carefully distinguish three sorts of fear: worldly fear, fear of divine punishment, and heavenly fear grounded in God's love.
2. To examine the roles that these fears play in the life of faith.
3. To employ these distinctions among sorts of fear to interpret difficult biblical passages.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Be Thou My Vision" locate the familiar tune SLANE in your church's hymnal or on the Web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a "Conference"

A "conference," in the language of early Christian communities, is a session of instruction with a wise teacher. In his appealing conference "On the Fear of God," Dorotheos of Gaza (c. 500-c. 560) puzzles over what sort of fear the psalmist has in mind in the exhortation, "Fear the Lord all you who love him" (cf. Psalm 34:9). "There are two kinds of fear: one preliminary, the other perfect; the one found in beginners—as someone called it 'of the devout'; the other in those perfected in holiness, of those having arrived at true love," Dorotheos writes. "[The latter person] forms a desire for God because he loves God himself, loves him and knows what is acceptable to God. Such a man is goodness itself, knowing what it is to be with God.... Such a man fears and keeps God's will, not for fear of punishment, not to avoid condemnation, but, as we have said, because he has tasted the sweetness of being with God: he fears he may fall away from it; he fears to be turned away from it." (*Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, p. 109)

True love, Dorotheos suggests, certainly drives out the *preliminary fear* (cf. 1 John 4:18), but with its intense intimacy and sweetness, it engenders the *perfect fear*.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer printed in the study guide in unison.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

"Wisdom does not require any special intellectual gifts," Ellen Davis has observed. "The fruit of wisdom, a well-ordered life and a peaceful mind, results not from a high IQ but from a disposition of the heart that the sages (wisdom teachers) of Israel most often call 'fear of the Lord.'" (Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the*

*Song of Songs*, 2000)

To help us understand this puzzling insight, Russell Reno carefully distinguishes two sorts of spiritual fear from worldly fear. Though each form of spiritual fear plays a critical role in the attainment of Christian wisdom, only the form that Reno calls “lasting, heavenly fear” endures in those saints who have been drawn into the “perfect love” of God. He interprets this fear that “lasts into eternity” in light of Christ’s mediating death on the cross.

### *Study Questions*

1. The objects of worldly fear are things in creation – such as sinful human beings, powerful institutions, or natural processes beyond our control – that can seriously harm or destroy us (or the people and things we love). The object of spiritual fear, on the other hand, is an aspect of God – either that God is righteous and punishes sinful disobedience, or that God is holy and loving.

Depending on their age and life situations, members might mention a variety of things that they dread with worldly fear: food insecurity and poverty; ill health, aging, suffering, and death; intimidation and lack of respect; natural disasters; failure in school, one’s career, or marriage; shame or punishment by others; and so on. Select two or three of these fears and discuss how they might tempt us to harm other people, to not care properly for the creation, and to harm ourselves by developing traits of selfishness, greed, envy, lust, anger, injustice, deceit, and other forms of sin.

2. Reno believes “these simple-minded views confuse worldly fear with spiritual fear.” He offers this analogy from the intellectual life: “Fear of ignorance or error can be colored by shame and anxiety, but this emotion does not work at cross-purposes to an animating love of truth. The same holds for fear of divine punishment. Sinners should recoil from the thought of a righteous judge capable of knowing and punishing all transgressions, and this fear is no more inconsistent with a love of God than fear of error contradicts a love of truth.”
3. As we saw in the answer to the first question above, in both forms of spiritual fear we are responding to an aspect of God. The spiritual fear of divine punishment is “pedagogical” in guiding us “away from sin and toward righteousness,” Reno suggests. “This guiding fear, however, must come to an end after the faithful enter their reward, for they have attained righteousness and no longer need the pedagogical fear of punishment.” In other words, while God remains righteous and prepared to punish sinful disobedience, those who are perfected in faithfulness no longer need to fear God’s punishment.

The second form of spiritual fear lasts forever because it grows from “the eternal and unfathomable difference between God and creature” which is “consistent with a [divine] love that draws us ever nearer.” Here Reno offers another analogy: “When we walk across bridges we may enjoy every confidence that the engineers have done a good job and the span will not collapse – and yet, who does not feel hints of terror when looking over the edge and into the depths of the chasm below. This is all the more true of our salvation in Christ. He is our trustworthy mediator, our bridge to eternal life in God, and our confident faith in his saving death is entirely consistent with a fearful sense of the depths into which he went on our behalf, depths from which we turn away in shuddering, instinctive horror.”

4. Assign four groups to review Genesis 22:12, Psalm 25:14, Psalm 111:10, and 1 John 4:18 in context, and report their conclusions to everyone. Reno carefully reviews the Abraham and Isaac story and suggests that in Genesis 22:12 the angel praises Abraham for exhibiting the mature spiritual fear that Reno calls “lasting, heavenly fear.” Psalm 25:14 relates fear of God to learning God’s covenant and developing friendship with God. Perhaps the psalmist is emphasizing the pedagogical function of the spiritual fear of punishment: it brings us to understand our sin and thus prepares us to seek God’s forgiveness (Psalm 25:11). Or the psalmist may be saying that friendship with God grows as we develop the lasting, heavenly fear that appreciates the awesome holiness and love of God. Psalm 111:10 is a classic statement relating the fear of God to the development of wisdom: members might discuss whether all three sorts of fear play some role in our living wisely and growing in relationship with God. Surely 1 John 4:18 is saying that perfect love of God “casts out” worldly fears; would perfect love also eliminate spiritual fear of God’s punishment?

### *Departing Hymn*

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.