

Key verse: Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 — “The conclusion, when everything has been heard, is this: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.” (NASB)

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. This morning I would like to speak on a topic which does not get talked about much in Christian circles these days. The title of my message today is: “The Fear of God.” This kind-of sounds like a scary topic ... and, yes, I suppose it is. But it is something that is found throughout Scripture and is therefore something we must pay attention to and take seriously.

The reason I have been thinking of this topic lately comes from a conversation I had with my wife earlier this year. Many of you know my wife and know that she sometimes speaks very straightforwardly. And so she had some hard-hitting words to say to me. One day she looked at me and said, “Brad, you don’t fear God.” It was a shock to hear those words. “Brad, you don’t fear God.” My wife is a very perceptive woman. Her words are not something to try to deny or run away from. I began to contemplate why she would say such a thing and so I began some self-reflection. All my adult life I have taken God and His Word very seriously. I have sought to follow Jesus and serve Him in His church. I enjoy serving His people in His church. Hmm. Maybe that’s part of the problem. I have gotten focused on “I.” “I enjoy.” Maybe my focus has been on “I” and “enjoy” and “serving” in the church of Christ. Maybe my mind has not been on the God who made me, the God who gifted me, the Lord who saved me. Have I forgotten to love God? Have I forgotten to fear God? Have I gotten too complacent in my spiritual life and self-satisfied?

In my younger days, there were a number of verses which were extra special to me and which I decided to order my life around. Philippians 2:3-4. Hebrews 10:24-25. James 1:27. 1st Corinthians 10:13. And one special verse in the Old Testament. On the PowerPoint screen you see Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. Let me say that Ecclesiastes is my favorite book in the Old Testament. I don’t know many Christians who would say that, but for me, it’s my favorite in the Old Testament. I’ve got a pessimistic streak in me, and Ecclesiastes points out that in many ways, life in this world can sometimes feel empty. Our pursuits in this life – whether they be a desire for knowledge or for pleasure or for riches – ultimately cannot satisfy our innermost being. You have probably heard the opening lines of Ecclesiastes quoted many times: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” All is empty and vain.

But God has created us ... created us with value and with purpose. After the book of Ecclesiastes describes the many ways life seems empty, the last two chapters of the book then contain some exhortations for how we should live our lives mindful of our Creator. And this culminates in the final two verses of the book, verses that have been important to me and which I have meditated on many times and tried to live by.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NASB) — “The conclusion, when everything has been heard, is this: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”

The conclusion, after everything this book has said, is that we must live mindful of our Creator. We must fear God. And we must keep His commandments. Fear God ... and obey His commandments. And this applies to every person on earth. Why should we do this? Verse 14 – “Because God will bring every act to judgment ...” Everything each one of us does will be judged by our Creator in the end. “Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is

good or evil.” You can read about that final judgment in places like Matthew 25, 1st Corinthians 3:11-15, and Revelation 20:11-15. Revelation 20 is when the Great White Throne Judgment occurs and books are opened and all the dead are judged by what is written in those books, judged according to what they have done during their life here on earth.

What does it mean to “fear God”? There are two basic aspects to this idea.

The first aspect is this: that the “fear of God” is manifested as “reverential awe” in the presence of a holy God. “Reverential awe.” Such as when Moses stood before the burning bush or when he spent time on the holy mountain, Mount Sinai. Exodus 3:5-6 (NASB) gives us the scene in front of the burning bush – “Then God said, “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And He said, “I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” This is reverential awe in the presence of a holy God.

The second aspect of the idea of the “fear of God” is this: to have terror or dread. Let me tell you one verse that used to strike terror in me in my teens and 20’s. Matthew 10:28 (NASB) – “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” People might be able to kill you, maybe as a result of persecution for being a follower of Jesus. Do not be afraid of such people. Instead, you should fear the God who created you and has the power to destroy any of us in hell. As a young man, that verse helped keep me from forsaking God and going into a life of sin.

Putting together these two aspects of the fear of God, I would say that to fear God is to be mindful of God at all times and in all pursuits of life. Be mindful of God ... remember Him as a holy presence in your midst ... remember that you will face judgment in the end ... your decisions in life should be made with these thoughts in mind. This is basically what it means to fear God: an internal awareness of Him, and that He will judge you in the end, and this should be manifested in actions by you that conform to His will for us as followers of Christ. Manifested by obedience to His commandments, or manifested in terror if you continue in disobedience to Him.

I have sought to live my life by Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 ... to fear God, keep His commandments, knowing that every action, whether seen or hidden, will be judged in the end. But then my wife gave me that surprising assessment of my life: “Brad, you don’t fear God.” Her words to got me wondering. Did I forget God Himself while serving in His church? Do I forget Him in my daily walk through life? Do I make compromises in my obedience to His commandments? Did I forget that God will bring every act I have done to judgment in the end? These are scary questions to ask, and I suppose the answer may be “yes” to all of them. I need to become more mindful of God again, more conformed to the image of Jesus, as Romans 12:1-2 says. I shouldn’t practice my prayer life in a routine manner that forgets to give heartfelt devotion to God and His Son.

Well, as I was contemplating these things, I pulled a book off my bookshelf which I’ve had for a long time but never read. It’s called “The Practice of Godliness.” Godliness. And early in the book, it made reference to a very helpful sermon series by a preacher whose name I was familiar with. This was a Baptist pastor named Albert Martin, and he was an eloquent and passionate preacher, and thoroughly Biblical. That book on godliness I picked up a few months ago recommended that I listen to a series of sermons entitled “The Fear of God” by pastor Martin. Although the sermons date from 1970, I thought maybe I would be able to find them online. Indeed I did, they are available for download and I put the web page address on the PowerPoint screen and in today’s sermon script (https://www.sg-audiotreasures.org/am_fear.htm). The sermons are hard-hitting and packed with Scripture. Not only did I listen to the series and try to reorder my mind toward fearing God in my daily life, but I also decided that I wanted to share those thoughts with you some day.

So, in the remainder of my message today will give you some highlights of what I learned in those series of sermons by Pastor Martin.

A few minutes ago, I made reference to Mount Sinai, the holy mountain. Do you remember what happened there? That is where Moses received the Ten Commandments. Do you remember the whole scene? I wish to read to you portions of Exodus 19 and 20 to show you the way in which the presence of God was physically seen and heard on the mountain when a covenant was made with the people of Israel and the commandments given to them.

Let's read Exodus 19:5-11 (NASB). This happens before the giving of the Ten Commandments. God speaks – “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My special treasure among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; ⁶ and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” ⁷ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.” ⁷ So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. ⁸ Then all the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD. ⁹ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also trust in you forever.” Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD. ¹⁰ The LORD also said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and have them wash their garments; ¹¹ and have them ready for the third day, for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people”.”

God desires to make a covenant with the children of Israel, and through Moses, the elders of the people promise to keep the covenant. Then God commands them to consecrate themselves. To *consecrate* means to set someone or something apart from common things and to be made sacred, to be set apart unto God for His use. For a period of three days, the people here get cleaned up for the purpose of meeting God at the mountain.

Exodus 19:16-20 (NASB) – “So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the entire mountain quaked violently. ¹⁹ When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him with thunder. ²⁰ Then the LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.”

Thunder and lightening and a thick cloud over the mountain. The people went outside the camp and stood at the foot of the mountain to meet their God.

Then in Exodus 20 God gives the people the Ten Commandments. Verses 1-3 – “Then God spoke all these words, saying, ² “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ “You shall have no other gods before Me...”
Well, you know the rest of the Ten Commandments ... I won't read them out here.

Exodus 20:18-21 (NASB) – “And all the people were watching and hearing the thunder and the lightning flashes, and the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it all, they trembled and stood at a distance. ¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but do not have God speak to us, or we will die!” ²⁰ However, Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him

may remain with you, so that you will not sin.”²¹ So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.”

God’s holy presence is manifested by thunder and lightening flashes and a trumpet sound and smoke. The people trembled. It was too much for them, they felt. But Moses says in verse 20 – “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you will not sin.”

First of all: don’t be afraid, God has a purpose in all this. That purpose is to test you. To test you. He wants to see if the people will really be faithful to Him and obey Him. He wants the fear of God to remain in these people, the people who have agreed to live in a covenant relationship with Him, as we saw in Exodus 19. The fear of God is to dwell in the covenant people of God. With the goal that they will not sin. The fear of God is to dwell in the people of God so that they will not be led into sin.

Some of the language in this passage is echoed in 1st Peter 2:9-10 (NASB). Here, the Apostle Peter is addressing people of the New Covenant, those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and he uses language borrowed from Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah. Peter writes, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.¹⁰ for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Notice that both in Exodus 19 and in 1st Peter, the people of God are called “a holy nation,” and they are either called a “kingdom of priests” or a “royal priesthood.”

The idea of priesthood here is an indication *not only* that the people are to be holy, separate from profane things and dedicated to God. Also, the notion here is that, as a “kingdom of priests,” the *covenant people are to be mediators between God and the Gentile nations*. The idea of priesthood is that a “priest” is a mediator between holy God and common people. And the covenant community – Israel in the Old Testament, and the church in the New Testament – are to act as mediators between God and the unbelieving, disobedient nations. We are to bring God’s message to them, call them to repentance, and bring them into a right relationship with their Creator.

You can’t do that if you yourself have forgotten to walk closely with God. In Matthew 5:13 (NIV) Jesus tells His disciples, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”

If the salt has lost its saltiness, it is no longer any good. If the people of God forget to take God seriously and don’t obey Him completely, we lose our effectiveness in the world. That is why we must be reminded to take God seriously, to fear God. At Mount Sinai, the people saw the physical manifestation of the holiness and majesty of God. It was overwhelming, and that is the point. The people did feel overwhelmed and they cried out to Moses. But Moses told them not to be afraid – he didn’t want them to feel paralyzed by fearfulness. Nevertheless, Moses told them they must remember to keep the fear of God within their hearts, for this would keep them from sin. It is interesting that Moses calls this a test. God tests His people to see if they will remain faithful to Him. Unfortunately, as we read through the Old Testament, we see the people fail over and over again.

We must not forget to fear God. As I told you earlier, there are two aspects to this fear. There is the fear of “reverential awe.” This was the effect God wanted when His presence was manifested in

cloud and thunder on the mountain. The second aspect of the fear of God is terror or dread. This appears less commonly than the first aspect in Scripture, but is nevertheless found from the beginning to the end of the Bible.

In Genesis 3:9-10 (NASB), Adam knows that he has transgressed God's one commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We read, "Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'"¹⁰ He said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself." Adam was afraid, and rightly so.

Psalm 119:120 (NASB) – "My flesh trembles from the fear of You, and I am afraid of Your judgments."

There is an interesting – and terrible – event in the New Testament that illustrates for us how important it is to take God seriously and be honest toward Him and toward our fellow Christians. This is the story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira in Acts chapter 5. They noticed how, at the end of chapter 4, Barnabas and some other Christians sold some of their property and gave all the money to the apostles for distribution to the poor members of the Christian community.

Acts 4:34-35 (ESV) – "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." They sold their land voluntarily – it was not a requirement to do this. But this episode showed how much the Christians cared for their needy brothers and sisters.

But this situation gave an idea to Ananias and Sapphira that maybe if they did something similar, they would receive recognition from their peers and people would be impressed with their charity. So they sold some land, but kept back some of the money for themselves. Their donation of money was for show, not for genuine charity from a heart of love.

Acts 5:1-6 (NASB) – "But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,² and kept back some of the proceeds for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.³ But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the proceeds of the land?'⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God.'⁵ And as he heard these words, Ananias collapsed and died; and great fear came over all who heard about it.⁶ The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him."

This act of hypocrisy, seeking self-glory and effectively stealing from the poor that he claimed to be helping, cost Ananias his life. And did you see the word "fear" here? The end of verse 5 – "...and great fear came over all who heard about it." The fear of terror and dread.

Let's continue the story, Acts 5:7-11 (NASB) – "Now an interval of about three hours elapsed, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.⁸ And Peter responded to her, 'Tell me whether you sold the land for this price?' And she said, 'Yes, for that price.'⁹ Then Peter said to her, 'Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.'¹⁰ And immediately she collapsed at his feet and died; and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.¹¹ And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard about these things."

Verse 11 again – “And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard about these things.” The whole church. The fear of God came over the whole church ... and to many others, perhaps non-Christians in the wider society. The lesson here: take God seriously, very seriously.

Hebrews 10:31 (NASB) – “It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Many years ago, I heard a sermon on what our ambition should be, and the preacher focused on some verses where that word “ambition” appears. One of them is 2nd Corinthians 5:9. It’s a very nice verse, but as I was preparing today’s message, I discovered that the next two verses after that one have a direct relation to my theme.

2nd Corinthians 5:9 (NASB) – “Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.” Our ambition in life should be to please God.

And now look at verses 10 and 11 telling us the reason to have this as our ambition – “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive compensation for his deeds done through the body, in accordance with what he has done, whether good or bad.

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade people, but we are well known to God; and I hope that we are also well known in your consciences.”

I will close today’s message with those verses, which sum up some of the themes I have touched on today. We will all be judged for each deed we have done during our life on this earth. We should please God. We should fear God. And verse 11 says, “...knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade people...” We persuade people to embrace the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you remember what I said earlier about being a “royal priesthood”? That is what we Christians are, and we mediate between God and a lost world. The fear of God should be a motivation to not only live a life of obedience, but also a life that touches the lost world with the gospel of Christ, calling them to repentance, and bringing them into a right relationship with their Creator.

I will close with the main themes of today’s message:

Fear God, with reverence, respect and honor.

Fear God with dread, because sooner or later He will bring every deed you have done to judgment.

Obey God’s commandments.

Take God seriously, and take your covenant relationship with Him seriously.

Be a royal priesthood and be a mediator between God and a lost world.

Be mindful of living in God’s presence in your daily activities.