

The Spirit of Fear

by David W. Gill

www.davidwgill.org

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We live in a time of fear and of fear-mongering. It is a kind of disease that weakens, disables, and even paralyzes our life and witness.

Fear makes us anxious and suspicious. It negatively affects our own happiness and well-being and that of the people close to us. Fear makes us withdraw and even hide from our neighbors and our community, from people who need us and who could be blessed by us.

There are countless things to be afraid of, it seems: high cholesterol . . . high blood sugar . . . high taxes . . . new diseases and conditions . . . old age . . . my 401(k) . . . funding for medicare and social security . . . poverty . . . foreclosure . . . losing my job . . . debt . . . the stock market . . . bankruptcy . . . lack of insurance . . . insurance company failures . . . layoffs . . . salary cuts . . . rejection by my friends . . . divorce . . . conflict . . . crime . . . guns . . . lack of guns . . . identity theft . . . al Qaeda . . . Muslims . . . gay marriage . . . liberals . . . "that one" . . . "no, that one" . . . anybody named "Bush" . . . anybody named "Hussein" . . . Gee I'm getting scared just reading my list.

There are whole armies of marketing professionals out there who want to play on your fears. They want your money or they want your votes in return for offering you some bit of protection from your fears. They are fear-mongers, fear-manipulators, fear-marketers, fear-campaigners.

And deeper than all that there is the great, ancient foe of God who wants to intimidate you into retreat and silence, paralyze you with fear, and steal your joy and freedom.

We live in a culture of fear and fear-mongering. But we must stand up and say "No" to this fear and this culture. We must reject this game of fear. It is not God who gives us the spirit of fear. Remember these statements: "The Lord is on my side! I shall not fear what mortals shall do to me" (Psalm 118). "Be not afraid." "Have no dread or fear . . . The Lord your God who goes before you is the one who will fight for you" (Moses, Dt 1:29-30). "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me, Lord" (Psalm 23:4). "The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life: of whom shall I be afraid?" (Ps 27:1). "This I know, that God is for me. . . In God I trust; I am not afraid. What can a mere mortal do to me?" (Ps 56:9-11).

Now we need to be careful here. God has not given us a spirit of fear . . . but neither has he given us a spirit of recklessness and irresponsibility. The answer to the foolishness of fear is not the foolishness of recklessness. Many of our fears are illusory. We are afraid of phantoms or of extremely rare, unlikely, and improbable situations. But some of our fears are based on real conditions and actual threats to our lives. We can't ignore these true threats and challenges --- but at the same time we must not allow these challenges to paralyze us with fear.

I have always loved Paul's statement to Timothy (II Timothy 1:7): "God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power, love, and a sound mind." I had to memorize this in Sunday School way back when, and I've always been grateful. This is my philosophy of life, my attitude. The fear mongers have never been very successful with me.

Paul's word here for "fear" in Greek is *delia* which means "cowardice" or "timidity." "Intimidation" fits here: intimidated by others and by our life circumstances.

But on the contrary: God has given us another spirit, his own Holy Spirit actually. And this Spirit brings three things in place of fear: power, love, and a sound mind. Here is the basic lesson: Fear comes in when we lack power, lack love, and lack a sound mind.

Fear Comes In Where We Lack Power

The Greek word for “power” in the Timothy text is *dunamis* . . . the root of our word dynamite. We fear our foes and challenges because we feel and know our weakness. We are frail and unreliable. We sense our weakness and vulnerability . . . and we become afraid of the things that threaten us.

But God has all the power we need. That’s why we don’t need to be afraid. It’s not about my personal power and ability but about God’s. God has promised to live within us and within his church. “I will dwell among you.” “God is at work within you.” “My strength is made perfect in weakness,” Jesus said. “We are weak but he is strong.” We’ve got the power, not in ourselves alone but in the God who lives within us by his spirit.

Two action items: first, cultivate a life of prayer and relationship with God. If you want to conquer fear, pray. Invite God to make his presence felt in your daily life. Read his word and listen. Second, cultivate relationships with your Christian brothers and sisters. Isolation and individualism are the road to fear. Fellowship and community are the road to God’s strength. Reach out and connect. God’s spirit of power dwells not just in the individual but in the body of Christ. You will experience weakness and fear if you try to go it alone.

Fear Comes In Where We Lack Love

The Greek word for “love” in our text is *agape* . . . the kind of love that reaches out to others in generous giving of ourselves. We are afraid because we do not love enough. As John puts it “Perfect love casts out fear.” “There is no fear in love” (I John 4:18). “Love one another, as I have loved you,” Jesus said. And not just “one another” in the Christian community but “love your neighbor as yourself” . . . and not just your near neighbors and good neighbors but “love your enemy” Jesus said. And don’t just love in word or in feeling, love in deed and action.

We spend far too much time fearing and hating our enemies, real and imagined. Why do we fear people of other races, nationalities, languages, or cultures? Partly it is because we feel powerless and they seem to threaten us but partly it is our substitute for reaching out in love and generosity. Hate and fear are the easy, lazy substitutes for love. Agape love is unconditional giving love . . . generosity and grace . . . the love of the cross. God has given us not a spirit of fear but a spirit of generous, giving love toward others.

Why don’t we pray for God’s blessing on our perceived enemies, whether they are in Washington DC, Baghdad, Wall Street, Hollywood, or across town . . . across the street . . . or across the room. Fear grows where there is no love. Love casts out fear.

Fear Comes In Where Sound Minds are Absent

Finally, notice in the text that God has not given us a spirit of fear but a spirit of sound thinking, wisdom, and good judgment. The Greek word here *sophronismos*. *Phroneo* is a term for “mind” and “thinking.” *Sophroneo* means a “sound mind,” one that is saved from bad, unhealthy thinking.

Fear comes in where there is ignorance and bad thinking. The spirit of God intends to renew and transform our minds and our thinking. We must do as Paul counsels in Romans 12: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." We are afraid of strangers because we feel powerless . . . because we lack God's love for them . . . and because we are ignorant and don't know them.

The action item is to make efforts to know and understand people, and events, and things in greater depth. Sound bites and rants from the media are not going to help. Deeper and broader reading, study, personal conversation, and lots of listening . . . adopting the perspective of Jesus and Scripture toward life and people . . . these the paths to a sound mind. Reject ignorance and shallow, one-sided, ideological thinking.

I love how the text ends with Paul saying "for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us."

I will never know everything but I will keep working toward a mind that belongs to Jesus Christ and is full of truth and understanding. I will never know everything but I do know Jesus Christ and I do have confidence in him, that he will keep me, strengthen me, protect me, fill me with his love, and help me with his Holy Spirit living in me and my brothers and sisters.

So let there be light: reject the fear mongers and manipulators whether inside or outside the church. Walk carefully but confidently and joyfully. Tap into the power of God and his people. Love God and love your neighbor --- even your enemy --- as yourself. Grow in grace and knowledge; take every thought captive to Christ; do not let the ignorant lead you to fear.