

THE FEAR OF MAN IS A SNARE

Today's Text: (a) Prov. 29; (b) Gal. 2: 11-14

Extracts:

1. *The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe [Prov. 29: 25]*
2. *Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision [Gal. 2: 11-12]*

*In the movie, **A Few Good Men** (1992), two US marines based in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, were charged with the murder of a fellow GI who was deemed to have “broken the code.” In their defence, the accused claimed that they were obeying the orders of the Base Commandant, a military “untouchable.” After a highly spirited defence by their counsel, the court found the two accused not guilty of murder. However, they were found guilty of obeying illegal orders. For that, they were dishonourably discharged from military service.¹*

The young soldiers had thought that they were doing the right thing to obey their commandant's orders. After all, who will dare to disobey military orders? What they did not know was that his power was limited by his authority (based on laws and rules). He did not have the authority to order summary execution of a junior officer who had broken a military code. Therefore, the young marines found themselves in a trap, a snare, from which they could not be rescued.

How many times have we thought that we were doing the right thing to obey instructions from those in authority over us only to have our fingers burnt in the end? The American and British soldiers who were tried for the maltreatment of Iraqi prisoners did not act on their own and in the end, they were not protected by high-up officers who had ordered them to do so. Top civil servants find themselves in embarrassing situations during a public probe of former ministers whose orders they had obeyed, even when they contradicted the law or operating rules. How many spouses have come to regret certain decisions that they had taken for fear of their partners? Have you found yourself in a snare for fear of man? Today's lesson is for you!

¹ With ideas from <http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0104257/plotsummary> and viewing the movie on television

1. What is a snare?

A snare is *a trap*. It is like a noose that is around the neck of somebody about to be hanged. It gets tighter and tighter but you cannot remove it! For those about to commit suicide, such pain is self-inflicted! In deed, most of us actually put ourselves in a noose just because we fear a man or woman, or want something from him/her.

A snare can come from the following sources:

a) *Respect for elders or constituted authority*

The word of God is quite clear that we should honour our parents if we want to live long [Ex. 20:12]. We are expected to be subject to the government and other governing authorities because “there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves” [Rom. 13: 1-2]. So, we are to fear our parents, teachers, elders and people in authority. For example, in explaining his patience with his father-in-law, Laban, who had cheated him, Jacob said, “unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and *the fear of Isaac*, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed” [Gen. 31: 42]. Isaac was Jacob’s father, and Jacob did not want to disappoint him by doing what was contrary to his upbringing.

Sometimes, however, such respect can become a snare. For example, some parents or community leaders use race or culture as a political statement, even when they know that it is a deception. In Hindu and Moslem communities, it is considered a renunciation of your culture to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Therefore, many people have been trapped by their culture and they may not be able to get out, no matter how they feel within. For example, the parents of the man who was born blind and now made whole by Jesus found it unable to publicly acknowledge their faith in Him. Do you know why? It was “because *they feared the Jews*, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue” [Jn 9: 22].

Sometimes, the culture or tradition may contradict the word of God. For example, the current Prime Minister of Canada is a professed and practising Christian but he is the champion of legalizing same-sex marriages because the Canadian Constitution is not against it and he has sworn to uphold the Constitution! Does that not remind you of what the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus, “Why do Your disciples transgress the

tradition of the elders?” In response, Jesus also threw a question back at them, “Why do you transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?” [Matt. 15: 1-3].

A very interesting example can be found in the book of Jeremiah [Jer. 35: 5-14]. The Lord sent Jeremiah to test the sons of the house of the Rechabites, if they would drink wine, contrary to what their father had taught them. The prophet set “bowls full of wine” before them but they refused to drink, saying, “We will drink no wine, for ... our father commanded us, saying, ‘You shall drink no wine, you nor your sons, forever’” [vv. 5-6]. These people feared their father’s command and had kept it. Yet, in spite of the message through the prophets, the same people would not extend the fear of their father to the fear of God, that is, obeying His commandments [vv. 14-15]. For many of us, the fear of our parents or elders or state authorities has trapped us into error, sin and disobedience and we look helpless to get out.

b) *Love of material gains*

Some people may know that what they have been asked to do is wrong in the sight of God but the lure of *immediate* material gain is too tempting to refuse. The civil servant who is helping a politician or contractor to defraud the state is counting how much will go into his or her own personal account. The clerics and cultural leaders who decry any attempt to evangelize their people are feeding fat on the ignorance or largesse of their ensnared adherents. For example, the most vocal opponents of the ministry of Jesus Christ were the scribes and Pharisees. When a demon was cast out from the girl with a spirit of divination, it was her masters to whom she had brought “much profit by fortune-telling” that instigated the arrest and beating of Paul and Silas [Acts 16: 16-24]. In deed, the love of money is the root of all evil “for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and *pierced themselves through with many sorrows*” [1 Tim. 6: 10].

Some of us have been trapped by inordinate ambition, love of sexual pleasures, selfishness, and such-like self-indulgence. We are looking for relief, satisfaction, peace of mind, etc., but we are searching in wrong places. They are not to be found in gurus, transcendental meditation, exercise or dieting. We may fear man and actually be putting ourselves in more snares!

c) *Satan is actually setting the snare!*

In defining the path of approved servants of God, Paul concluded, “that they may come to their senses and escape *the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will*” [2 Tim. 26]. I wonder how many

people in a snare are aware that Satan could be behind it all? For example, when David commanded Joab and the leaders of the people to take a census of the people of Israel, Joab suspected that it was not based on the word of God. However, knowing that David was *usually* God-led in what he did, the general went along. The truth was that it was Satan who “stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel” [1 Chron. 21: 1-4]. How do we know that that man or woman that we fear is not doing the will of Satan even when s(he) looks like the minister of God? We should not forget that “Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” [2 Cor. 11: 14-15].

We can conclude from the forgoing analysis that we cannot avoid fearing people in authority over us. Our upbringing as children, our schooling, our spiritual welfare, all depend on fearing and respecting people in authority. However, *the fear of man becomes a snare if it takes us away from the fear of God*. Let us look at some Bible cases to drive this point home.

2. You can fear man as long as it is not a snare!

a) *Saul and the Amalekites* [1 Sam. 15: 1-35]

Through the prophet Samuel, God commanded king Saul to “go and attack Amalek and *utterly destroy all that they have and do not spare them*” [vv. 1-3]. Saul attacked the Amalekites. However, instead of destroying everything as commanded, he took prisoner Agag, the king of Amalek, and the best of the flock of sheep, oxen and “all that was good” [vv. 7-9]. When Samuel then confronted him to explain why he had not done as instructed, Saul answered, “I have sinned for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, *because I feared the people and obeyed their voice*” [12-24].

Saul found himself in a snare because he feared his people. Either he feared insurrection or he wanted to be seen as popular or democratic or practised participative management! Whatever was his reason, his fear of man made him to despise the fear of God. For that disobedience, he lost his throne to David. His fear of man became a snare.

b) *Peter fears his culture* [Gal. 2: 11-19]

We do know that Jesus had a running battle with the Jewish elders because He led His disciples to do things contrary to Jewish culture and tradition. For example, they did not wash their hands before eating [Matt. 15: 1-2]. They mixed and ate with publicans and sinners, such as Zacchaeus [Lk 19: 1-10]. Christ’s defence was that He came to preach the kingdom of

God, a kingdom that is “not eating or drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” [**Rom. 14: 17**]. In this kingdom, there are neither Jews nor Gentiles, but all are the children of Abraham by faith [**Rom. 4: 9-16**].

Peter was a Jew. According to the Jewish culture, he should not be in the company of the Gentiles because they were uncircumcised. However, having been raised as the chief disciple of Jesus, you would expect that he would be in the forefront of promoting the culture of the kingdom. He demonstrated his new-found faith when he and other disciples were brought before the Sanhedrin and warned to stop preaching the risen Christ. He boldly told the leaders of the temple, “We ought to obey God rather than men” [**Acts 5: 29**]. However, some years later, at Antioch, Peter developed cold feet!

When he was alone with the believers who were of Gentile origin, he mixed and ate with them freely. However, as soon as believers of Jewish descent came from the Lord’s brother, James, a prominent leader of the church in Jerusalem [**Gal. 1: 19; Gal. 2: 9**], Peter and his fellow Jewish Christians began to behave funny! They kept themselves away from the Gentile believers and no longer ate with them [**vv. 11-12**]. Paul’s travel companion, Barnabas, “was carried away with their hypocrisy” [**v. 13**]. He joined them. If that could happen to the early Church that was more Spirit-filled than most churches of today, we had better sit up!

Immediately, Paul saw the hypocrisy as a snare coming from fear of man. He withstood Peter “to his face, because he was to be blamed” [**v. 11**]. Interestingly, God was to use Peter later to bring the Gentile household of Cornelius to the fold of believers [**Acts 10**]. His snare had been broken.

c) *Daniel and Darius* [**Dan. 6: 1-24**]

Daniel was the head of the three governors who were next in rank to king Darius the Median ruler of Persia. The other governors and those below them got envious of Daniel’s prominence and planned how to hurt him. They tricked the king to sign a decree that anyone who petitioned any other god or man for thirty days except the king himself should be cast into the lions’ den [**vv. 1-8**]. For Daniel, it was a clear choice between fear of man that is the king and fear of the living God that he worshipped. What did he do?

He went to the upper room of his apartment, opened the windows wide, and prayed openly to God, as was his custom [**v. 10**]. The people reported him to the king who reluctantly threw him into the lions’ den, saying, “Your God whom you serve continually, He will deliver you” [**v. 10**]. In deed, Daniel was delivered, for his God sealed the mouths of the lions. The following day, after the king had discovered that Daniel was alive, he

threw all his accusers and their families into the den where the very hungry lions had a feast day! Moreover, the king made a decree to make the worship of Daniel's God the national religion! Daniel's prominence and prosperity flowered and extended to the reign of Cyrus [vv. 19-24], the Persian king that God used to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem [Ezra 1: 1-2].

Daniel could thereafter afford to fear that kind of man because the king himself feared God. That is why Paul has said, "the things which you learned and received and heard and saw *in me*, these do, and the God of peace will be with you" [Phil. 4: 9]. *When you fear those who fear God, you will not be ensnared.*

3. Conclusion

Are you afraid or ashamed to pray in the restaurant, club, or in your office? Are you scared to share the word of God with others because it is politically incorrect to do so under the doctrine of the separation of church and state? Are you a fervent Christian on Sunday but a social pervert from Monday to Saturday? Are you bold enough to fight off temptation even if it will cost you your job or a promotion or a good grade? The fear of man is not as far-fetched as you think!

To fear man is not to fear God, *unless that man will lead you to God*. To fear man is to walk by sight, not by faith. To fear man is to prefer darkness to light. As the saying goes, *the child who fears the dark is superior to the adult who fears the light*. Therefore, when you find yourself in a snare due to fear of man, be like the little child. Run!

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