

Wisdom & Finance: Overcoming Fear

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Would you stand as we honor the reading of the scripture text today from 1 Timothy 6: 18-19? Would you hear the word of the Lord? “They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share...so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” This is the Word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God. Amen.

An FYI moment for you. Sermon topics are planned a year in advance, and when Bill is on vacation and sabbatical, I know that I have the freedom to preach on whatever topic /theme that the Spirit gives me. Bill Couch did not tell me to preach on finances and generosity to avoid his doing it. That’s not the way our relationship works.

We have talked about greed, consumerism, creditis and Affluenza in a biblical perspective over the last few weeks. We have spoken about the tithe, giving, how money and possessions are gifts from God to be used for His glory. We realize that it is a loud voice of the world that can cause us to drift off the road into the weeds and to pursue what the world thinks is best. And we have explored how we can get back on the right path, and how we might simplify our lives and cultivate a greater sense of contentment and joy in each of our lives.

However, there is one more final topic we need to address: **fear**.

Fear is a defense response that God builds into us so we can be safe. Our brains respond to perceived threats, and we adapt by either fighting back or fleeing to safety. But there is a dilemma for us, and it is that we have trouble at times distinguishing if something is a real threat. Typically we tend to have overactive fear mechanisms. Once Adam and Eve sinned by chowing down on the forbidden fruit, they were afraid. From then on, humans have found themselves afraid. Many of our fears are a result of our separation from God and corrupted ideas of what is good in us.

We can fear rejection; we can fear failure, even success. We can fear our employment situation or boss, fear the future, or next month’s credit card statement. Living in fear, well it’s not really living at all. So, what can we do?

Here are three keys to overcoming fear.

1. Trust God - God delivered the Israelites from their 400 years of slavery in Egypt. They wind up at the southern border of the Land of Canaan, called the Promised Land. Moses at God’s guiding picks one man from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. The task? Go explore, investigate, spy out the Promised Land and report back to Moses and the gathered Israelites. Inform them of the scope of the land. The spies are tasked with the following orders, “**See what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns they live in are unwalled or fortified, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not.**” Almost as an afterthought we read this text, “**Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land.**” **Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes.**” (Numbers 13: 18-20.) The 12 spies travel around the land of Canaan for 40 days and 40 nights. That means a long time in the Bible. And they finally

return to report to Moses and leaders, then give this report. Can't you see Caleb and the rest of the weary yet excited Israelite spies?

“The land flowed with milk and honey, but the people who live there are strong, the cities walled and fortified.” Caleb and Joshua were the only ones who said, “Let's go and take this land. We can do it. We can overpower and overwhelm these inhabitants.” Yet the 10 other spies only saw the negatives. The fear they had in their minds and hearts was overwhelming. “The people are big there, no, bigger than huge; they are far stronger than we are. And to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” Defeated, afraid, cowering.

The 10 spies' negative spirits infected the tribes of Israel. So much so that God made sure everyone of that generation, all the original wanderers in the desert, died without entering the land of Canaan. Only Joshua and Caleb, and the newer generation, were allowed to enter.

The 10 spies and like-minded people could not imagine taking the land for themselves, “are you kidding?” The people rejected Joshua and Caleb and said, “Let's get us some new leaders and head back to captivity, to slavery to Egypt. “ They were so afraid of the future, they were ready to return to slavery rather than face what was in front of them.

Joshua and Caleb saw the same things as the other 10 spies. But it was their trust and faith in God, which sustained them. Their faith, their trust in God allowed them to believe and know God would provide for them.

Psalm 118:6 says, “With the Lord on my side I do not fear.” Jesus spoke to his disciples in Matthew 14:27 and said, “It is I, do not be afraid.” The angel's words of assurance to Mary were, “Mary, be not afraid.”

Trusting God is the first key to overcoming fear. We can see the giants, the overwhelming factors in our life and we can live in FEAR. Or, we can say, sometimes with a deep sigh or breath, “Okay God, I will trust you. Guide me, walk with me, I trust you to lead me.”

Now I know that it is a good thing to say, “Well we should trust God in the face of fear,” but HOW do we do this? The remaining two steps help us to understand.

2. Offer gratitude-

Thessalonians 5: 16-18 says, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.” Paul has written to Christians in the city of Thessalonica who have suffered for their faith. Yet they are told to be cheerful, by praying without ceasing- meaning being constantly aware of God's presence. Give thanks in all circumstances.

People who give thanks for what they have and are, generally have a bright and healthy outlook on life. You have heard the story about the man who said, “I complained because I had no shoes, until I saw the man who had no feet.” Giving thanks is looking at the glass half full, not half empty. Seeing that things will get better.

I would challenge you to try something for one week. Just before you go to bed and say your prayers, jot down 3 things you are thankful for from your day. Then thank God for them. See what happens as you cultivate the habit of giving thanks to God.

3. Live a Life of Service and generosity to others-

Do you know someone who gives a lot of their time, effort and self to others? People like that are a delight to be around. Many of you are like that. Those who serve as missionaries, those who help with Habitat houses, Sunday school teachers, volunteers with youth, those who visit shut ins, those who straighten up the sanctuary after church, the ones who fix food for the homeless. The idea of service and generosity are keys to overcoming fear and finding our own peace and joy.

Corinne, well, she was a complainer. A chronic complainer. I was told about this woman my second day at the church I served in Ohio. People said she was fussy, antagonistic, a difficult person to deal with. So I finally got to meet this woman with the assumption that I will be meeting a dragon lady of some sort. Instead I met a lady who in her late 70's was small, well dressed, and rather quiet. For the moment.

We got acquainted with each other, and she wanted to know about my parents, sisters, my kids, where I grew up, what I liked, disliked, etc. As we shared information about our lives back and forth, I soon learned that this lady had been widowed in her 30's and had raised 3 sons and a daughter. Putting each of them through college, seeing all of them become successful in their careers.

She was no nonsense, businesslike and did not suffer fools or slackers. And, yes, she was a complainer. But she was also desperate for someone to listen to her. I had a sense that she may have felt like she didn't matter; maybe she thought she was never heard? I asked her what she liked to do in the church and she said, "haven't found what I like yet preacher. Probably too late for me."

About 6 months later it was snowing, hard. Big fat flakes falling out of the grey January sky and I was looking out the front doors of the church. And I saw first one kid, then another, then another, traipsing home in the wet and cold down our sidewalk. We were right next to an elementary school.

One of the kids waved and I waved back, and I watched this kid with a younger sister in tow, head across the street, then go to her house. I learned that most of the kids in this neighborhood were latch key kids who lived in single parent homes of moms or dads who worked until 5:30 or 6PM

I mentioned my observation one day to Corinne, and she said, "Well somebody should DO something." And I replied, "What did you have in mind?"

After Corinne came by to see for herself, she began to go out and talk to the kids. One day it was so nasty and cold she came to church in time to invite the kids, about 12 of them, to warm up in the Fellowship Hall and have some snacks and juice. She got a few volunteers to contact parents to see if it was okay for them to hang out at the church after school. She got people to get approval by the state of Ohio for Community of Faith UMC to be an after school venue for the elementary kids. Corinne was there every day, 5 days a week, talking to, reading to, mentoring and loving the kids.

Corinne was no longer a complainer; she was one who was invested in mentoring, tutoring, instructing kids. She was so busy she didn't have time to complain. She was doing for others.

Corinne recruited a variety of volunteers, retired teachers, a nurse or two, and some who were "shut ins" to help with the kids after school. Turns out that many of the shut ins were not shut ins. They just had no real reason to go out and about. Doing for others changed their perception of life.

Something happens when we take our eyes off of ourselves and choose to serve others. The same thing happens when we practice generosity.

John D. Rockefeller at 33 years of age made his first million. He was a savvy and aggressive businessman who saw business as the all consuming drive in his life. Yet at age 53 he was diagnosed with an illness that made his hair fall out, prevented him from eating, made him depressed and doctors told him he had just one year to live.

Amazingly, he realized that if his death was imminent, he could take nothing with him and started giving his resources away. That was his mission. He gave hundreds of millions of dollars to colleges and universities, to hospitals and medical research, and to his church and missions. His generous funding helped discover the cure for a host of killer diseases. And John D. Rockefeller died at age 98. His life was saved when he quit focusing on himself, and began focusing on others and being generous in his giving.

We live in uncertain economic times today. The key to finding peace is not in amassing huge fortunes or acquiring status and power, the key is in trusting God. We are not alone, and we will survive a stock market adjustment or economic downturn. We must act in all times and circumstances by giving thanks to God in all circumstances. We should choose to serve others and practice generosity, and we shouldn't be surprised that as we do these things we will realize our fear is giving way to faith.

Most of the people around sound a lot like the 10 spies who could only see the giants in the Promised Land. And as a result they gave in to their fears. What we desire, what we need today are more Joshuas and Calebs. People who see the giant, but still trust in God, causing their fear to give way to faith.

IN the knowledge of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior we are able to face the giants of uncertainty, and fear in life. Knowing that we are forgiven, loved and accepted by the King of Kings, Lord of Lords is the greatest gift imaginable.

We close with the words of the Shaker tune, Simple Gifts:

Tis the gift to be simple, tis the gift to be free,
Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And then we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

Would you bow your heads as we pray?