

## INTRO:

If you have a Bible or Bible App and I hope you do, go ahead and turn-to/click-on **2 Corinthians 5/2 Corinthians 5 vv.11-21**. And then once you're there: Highlight it, Bookmark it, Star it, whatever you need to SAVE it so you can come back TO it...BECAUSE today we are beginning a multi-week exploration through this text, in a NEW series entitled, **"What Church Can Be."**... In the spirit of the Puritans, who'd take a text and just break it down word-for-word until they bled it dry of all it's glorious meaning and application, we're gonna spend the next season together working our way through each phrase of the INCREDIBLY optimistic vision this passage gives for **what church can be**...And I'll just tell, the reason we're doing this is 3-fold: **One**, After having spent the last season feasting on what God is REALLY like, as seen in Jesus' Kingdom Parables, I've gotten the sense/as I've prayed about this series that we need to spend equal time considering who WE really are/as the church, in light of what God's really like! And in-part, that's cuz **Two**, we're at somewhat of a cultural cross-roads when it comes to church these days. Before COVID, statistics were pretty clear that 70% of society is uninterested IN church.<sup>1</sup> And unfortunately, SINCE Covid, that number has only increased, with Barna saying that now 1 in every 3 REGULAR church-goers has dropped out of attendance altogether<sup>2</sup>...And of course there's a myriad of reasons for that, but I would suggest that behind ALL of em is the fact that we've failed to really see/or maybe' forgotten ALL the glorious things God intends church to be - things like *"His bride"* and evenmore the theater of the Gospel in which you and I get to stage previews of God's coming kingdom...Which brings me to the **Third** reason we're doing this series, which is: I LOVE teaching on the church. It's long-been one of my favorite things to do, ever since, 16 years ago I read **Ephesians 3:10**, which says that *"through THE CHURCH the manifold wisdom of God (is being) made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."* - saw in THAT passage and others like it: that Jesus' church/you/me are the public revelation of the mystery of salvation. - His "Plan A" for reaching the world and there is...no...Plan...B!... Which if ya didn't know, is WHY we named THIS church **"Hub"** - not just because it's a nickname for our city, but because we really believe that the church is God's ordained HUB from which we, not only live and thrive, but are able to help others find thriving life in Christ too...SO...whether you're new around here and just want an introduction to who we are; OR you're exploring faith and maybe wanna understand a little of the method behind the madness; OR you've been here awhile, BUT maybe could just use fresh encouragement about this thing we call "church"; I HOPE you'll make every effort to join us each week so that God-willing you'll catch ahold of the optimistic vision **2 Corinthians 5:11-21** gives for **what church can be**...SO...let's follow along together as we hear the reading OF **2 Corinthians 5:11-21**: **(PAUSE RECORD)** **Jude** reads...

## TEXT:

Hey, can we thank BOTH **Jude** AND God for the reading of His Word? **(START RECORD)**... One of my favorite moments from The Office is, when, after Michael and Dwight have sought to settle a dispute by fighting at Dwight's karate dojo, Michael, who's deemed the winner of what

<sup>1</sup> <https://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2016/06/28/research-unchurched-will-talk-about-faith-not-interested-in-going-to-church/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>

ends up being an incredibly pathetic fight, says into the camera, “*Would I rather be feared or loved? Easy. Both. I want people to be afraid of how much they love me.*” And obviously, it’s a ridiculous quote, BUT it’s ridiculous because it just slightly skews something that’s true: that love and fear actually go hand-in-hand. **Psalm 111:10** says it this way, “*The FEAR of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who practice it have a good understanding. His PRAISE - which is another word for love-expressed - endures forever!*” One commentator translates that saying, “*the path of wisdom is to love the God you fear, and fear the God you love!*”<sup>3</sup>

In **2 Corinthians 5:11-21** here, the Apostle Paul locates everything **church can be** in “*the fear of God.*” He’s, of course, writing to the church in Corinth, WHICH had fallen into tremendous conflict and, in a number of ways, deviated from the Gospel. And so what Paul does is write to bring about reconciliation and a return to belief and practice IN the Gospel! For example, in the passage right before ours, he’s just reminded the Corinthians that their final destiny/the final destiny of all people is that one day we’ll stand before God - what’s called the “judgment seat of Christ” - and be called to account for not just how we lived, but in whom we ultimately trusted. He’s reminded them of this in hopes of recalibrating their division and deviance, so that he can then offer, what is our passage, one of the most extensive descriptions of **what church can be**.

And ya notice, IN that description he starts by saying, “*Therefore - or in light of having to one-day stand before God - knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others...*” That’s our focal phrase this morning: “*Knowing the fear of the Lord...*” **How many of you would say you do fear well?** If you do, I applaud you, cuz generally-speaking, I don’t think we do it well. A couple years ago, the most popular class at Yale University - so a school which is, by all accounts, filled with students who can think rationally and not be plagued by fear and worry - the most popular class was a course titled “Psychology and the Good Life.” About 1,200 students/¼ of all Yale undergrads, enrolled in it BECAUSE according to a report by the Yale College Council more than half of all undergrads had sought mental health care from the university in order to deal with stress, fear and worry.<sup>4</sup>...We don’t do fear well...CERTAINLY not fearing God. Cuz what we tend to do with this idea of “fearing God” is, you might say, theologically ditch-dive? Depending on your personality, maybe you’re spiritual upbringing, we’re either Puritans/Fundamentalists or Romantics, Liberals, Emergents,<sup>5</sup> which is to say, we either veer too far off to the “*God is holy and righteous*” side, to the point that we can separate from people in a kind of unloving way OR veer too far off to the “*God is love and grace*” side, to the point that we become tolerant and permissive of everything no matter how sinful it might be. We just don’t do fear and specifically “fearing God” well! And YET, Paul speaking about it here is just 1 of the 300 different times<sup>6</sup> in which the Scriptures don’t just talk ABOUT it, but really say that everything begins WITH it. Again **Psalm 111**: “*The FEAR of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom!*”

<sup>3</sup> Fear of God - David Mears | 13 August, 2012

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.denisonforum.org/columns/cultural-commentary/suspicious-letter-sent-donald-trumps-daughter-law-hospital/>

<sup>5</sup> [How Do Love and Holiness Relate?](#) - from 9Marks Blog: Building Healthy Churches - Jonathan Leeman

<sup>6</sup> Stat from David Platt, “[The Cross and Christian Ministry](#),” in *David Platt Sermon Archive* (Birmingham, AL: David Platt, 2013), 4144.

So what does Paul mean by “*knowing the fear of God*,” cuz if everything/including everything **church can be**, stems from this, we gotta know what he means. And I’ll tell ya, it’s not easy to understand, cuz almost every commentary you read equates “*the fear of God*” to reverence, respect, awe/these kinds of things. And honestly, I have no doubt that’s what it means...in part. And I say, “in-part” because/and one particular Pastor - David Platt - was helpful in me seeing this, but if you just scan through the Bible and the stories in which people come into contact WITH God - ya know, Isaiah, Moses, John in Revelation, Peter at Jesus’ Transfiguration - what you see is that THOSE folks/yeah they revered, respected, were in awe of God, BUT they were also scared out of their minds too! Isaiah face-planted he was so scared. Moses, had to completely turn away from beholding God’s glory. Peter, who’s always sticking his foot in his mouth ends up being left almost speechless at Jesus’ transfiguration...When the Bible/Paul talks about “*the fear of God*,” there’s a sense in which it literally means, “*the FEAR of God*.”

And I know a lot of people will say, “*well, that can’t be true or that’s just an OT thing. Cuz in the NT, after Jesus has gone to the Cross, we don’t HAVE to fear God.*” And to some degree that is true. Jesus dying IN your place FOR your sins allows you and me, as sinners, to not only confidently come into God’s presence, but know that we’ve always been held by a love that’s already ours. So to some degree that’s true. But here’s the problem with the overall assumption. **Number 1**, there’s no such thing as OT and NT God. As **Hebrews 13:8** says, “*Jesus Christ - who’s of course God - is the same yesterday, today and forever.*” There’s no such thing as an OT God of holiness and wrath and a NT one of love and grace. It’s the same God only ever holding both of those things in perfect tension, while albeit, at times, highlighting one side of the tension...But **Number 2**, it’s NOT just an OT thing, because in the NT you’ve got, for example, the Apostle John, who’s called “the disciple Jesus loved,” getting a glimpse of Jesus in heaven, in **Revelation 1**, and saying, “*As soon as I saw Him, I fell over as though dead.*” This dreadful fear of God...And it makes sense right, because in being perfectly holy and righteous, God is by definition, so removed from evil, so pure, morally superior as to be terrifying to those of us full of pride, boasting, pretense, and sin!...Maybe no better illustration of this than in C.S. Lewis’ “*Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe*” when the Pevensie children are asking about meeting the Lion Aslan, who of course represents Jesus. Mr. Beaver, recalling an old Narnian rhyme says this about meeting him for the first time, “*Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight, At the sound of his ROAR, sorrows will be no more, When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death, And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.*” This combination of goodness and terror at the same time, that would later lead little Lucy Pevensie to wonder if playing with Aslan was more like playing with a kitten or a thunderstorm, because He’s just so other that, while being invitingly friendly, he’s also frighteningly indomitable that they can’t even endure, as Lewis says, his “*great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes*” without trembling and averting theirs<sup>7</sup>...THAT’S what it’s like to be in God’s presence and WHY John Calvin rightly said, “*Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance UNTIL they’ve contrasted themselves with the majesty of God.*” To “*know the fear of God*,” as Paul says, is to

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<sup>7</sup> The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, pp.168, 169 - <https://rekindle.co.za/content/the-lion-the-witch-and-the-wardrobe-from-death-to-life/>

be intimately acquainted with the fact that because He's so perfectly holy/other - not to mention the one to whom we'll all give an account - HE is to be what influences everything about you.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I think about it that way, sadly, I see such a lack OF "*the fear of God*" in my life. Even just in how casual I can be WITH God. I mean think about the way you pray/DO you regularly pray? Not trying to make you feel guilty, but our lowest attended events as a church are always the ones revolving around prayer...Do we really understand who it is that we're GETTING to talk to?...Or how bout how much time you spend reading your Bible in comparison to say watching Netflix or scrolling through your Facebook feed/even how you come into this gathering each week to hear FROM the Bible...Do we understand WHO it is we're getting to hear from when we open this book?...Or just how casual we can be with what we watch or how much time, energy and resource we spend on things that are fading...I don't know about you, but I just sadly see such a lack of "*the fear of God*" in my life, which is not only sad, but scary since Paul's saying, that fear/"*knowing the fear of God*"/letting Him factor into everything - THAT'S the beginning FOR everything **the church can be**. Cuz you understand, as R.C. Sproul said, "*Christianity is not about involvement with religious experience. It INVOLVES meeting with a holy God...*"<sup>8</sup> It means seeing yourself as utterly and totally **dependent** upon the One who's utterly and totally other than you and me!

Now here's why that's a really good thing/why the "fear of God" is a great thing...*It's what eliminates all your other fears!...The fear of God is the only way to conquer all your other fears!* Think about people in history who've achieved great things. You read their stories and almost always they talk about risks they faced before they were successful and the fears associated WITH those risks right? But THEN they'll talk about another fear, like fearing NOT being successful; or being stuck in a dead-end job; or not being able to live out their passion and how THOSE fears are what pressed em to overcome the risk. **What are they saying?** They're saying, the cure for your fears is NOT to stop fearing - that's impossible/even dangerous, since rational fears are meant to protect us. No! The cure is not to stop fearing, but to fear the right thing/the greater thing! Listen to how **Proverbs 29:25** says it: "*The fear of man lays a trap, but whoever (fears/trusts) the LORD is safe.*" When you fear other people, for example, which is to say you're always concerned about people's opinions and perspectives of you - the more you factor-in their opinions and perspectives - the more it **does what?** Drives you crazy right? You almost start to go insane with worry about what people are gonna think, and how they're gonna perceive you/whether they'll accept you or not...You're "*laying a trap*" for yourself...The solution then is not to say, "*well I'm just not gonna care what other people think. I'm only gonna care what I think.*" And I know that's kind of a popular self-care mantra these days. **But do you understand** what people who don't care what others think are?...They're Sociopaths! And you know what people who only care about how THEY think are?...Narcissists! The answer to "*the fear of man*" is not to stop fearing, but/according to **Proverbs**, "*to Trust/fear the Lord.*" **Why?** Because you'll be living according to reality. Cuz think about it: it's just common sense, right, to fear a God who's so other, as to be able to sustain everything! Listen to how the prophet **Isaiah** said it:

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<sup>8</sup> p.255

*“Why do you say, O Jacob, O Israel, ‘My way’s hidden from the Lord?’ - In other words, why do you think you can get away with not fearing God? - Have you not heard, he says, The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn’t faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength...They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength...”<sup>9</sup> **You see what that’s saying?** It’s saying, while fearing other people - their opinions, perspectives - leads to INsanity, *“the fear of the Lord”* leads to...sanity, BECAUSE it allows you to live consistent with the ULTIMATE reality that the same God who we oughta fear and tremble before given His power to *“create the ends of the earth and not grow weary;”* that’s the same God who uses that SAME power to sustain those He loves.<sup>10</sup>*

And if you don’t believe it: just look no further than the Gospel! **Cuz what do we find in the Gospel?** We find a God who’s so holy, righteous, pure, undefiled, and separate, as to be terrifying to sinners like us/we can’t even enter His presence - that’s what all the talk in the OT of the temple and its “Holy of Holies” was all about...And YET, what do we find on that first Good Friday and Easter? We find the dividing wall into the holy of holies torn in two as Jesus is crucified; signifying that by His death - by the death of a perfect, sinless substitute - those who place their faith IN that substitute are granted unfettered access to this holy God...In other words, in the Gospel, you find holiness and love perfectly wedded together: A God who in being so holy, necessarily can’t sin **right?** BUT in not being able to sin, necessarily can’t sin against YOU! Is only ever doing everything to love and sustain you EVEN if it means giving up His own Son!...So you see, it’s NOT that the Gospel leads you to STOP fearing God/somehow makes Him less holy and more permissive. It’s that it leads you to fear Him in such a way as to be driven toward Him in trust...Cuz after all, if God is always ever doing everything to love you and will never sin against you, then as Jackie Hill Perry says, *“shouldn’t that make Him the most trustworthy being there is?”*<sup>11</sup>

**So you see?** Unlike Michael Scott, God isn’t interested in having you *“be afraid of how much you love him.”* No! He’s interested in, as **1 John 4:18** says, loving YOU so perfectly that it casts out every OTHER fear...OTHER than the fear of Him! *“Knowing the fear of God”* is the beginning of everything **church can be**, because apart from it, we’re no different than anyone else - tossed about by every wind of fear and frustration, every ounce of insecurity and change of circumstance!...But WITH it, even your deepest fears are cast out so that you become profoundly secure person, who can confidently say things like:

- If I never get married, it’s ok, because I still have the love of the God of the universe.
- If I lose my job, it’s ok, because *“the Creator of the ends of the earth”* still watches over me.
- If I never fully find victory over that sin or addiction, it’s ok, because my Heavenly Father still sees me as righteous, given the truly righteous One who powerfully stood in my place.
- If I lose my status, my beauty, my health/even my life, it’s ok, if I have Jesus.

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<sup>9</sup> Isa 40:27-31

<sup>10</sup> Insight about God’s sustaining and loving power from “Fear of God” | 13 August, 2012 - David Mears

<sup>11</sup> “Holier Than Thou: How God’s Holiness Helps Us Trust Him” - (B&H, 2021) - Jackie Hill Perry

- And in the meantime, BECAUSE I have all the security that comes with knowing and fearing Him, I can start to be real and authentic in relationships. I can open myself up to intimacy. I can trust again because I know I'll never be so hurt as to lose what I have IN Christ.
- AND I can quit trying to control everything, because I "*know the fear of the One God*" who "*endures and never grows weary*" has everything under control for me.

**You see?** "*Knowing the fear of God*" is the basis for everything **church can be!** Hub, success for us HAS TO BE, nothing more and nothing less than learning to trust and depend on our great God for every area of life, cuz history has proven that the greatest danger to the church is not external/you know, lack of resources, slow growth or even persecution - after all, God has OFTEN used EVEN persecution to expand the church. No! The greatest danger to the church has never been external...but internal - The church/US taking our eyes off God, not **DEPENDING** on Him, failing to ascribe to Him the worth He's due because we, in some way, just become too casual or fail to factor Him into everything about us. THOSE are the churches who regardless of their size or resources, ultimately lose influence and the ability to impact - the mainline churches that dot the landscape of our city and really all of New England - BECAUSE those are the churches to whom God says, "*if you won't depend on ME, how can I bless YOU?*" ...**SO let me ask you:** Do you fear Him? Does Jesus factor into everything about you? Is He the primary consideration for everything in your life: Your career, your relationships, finances; your sexuality, hobbies, whether or not you'll work to stay in the city, your commitment to this church family, even your free-time. OR are there areas of your life in which He either doesn't factor-in OR WORSE are off-limits to Him? Because if there are, you have to question whether or not you actually "*know the fear of God.*" **Do you know it? Let's Pray...Amen!**