

April 17, 2010 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Ecclesiastes 12:13&14 I Believe in God but I Don't Fear Him, by Andy McDonald

At the beach have you ever gone out to swim in the ocean, body surf, or ride your boogie board, float or surf board and after playing a while realize that you have drifted up the beach without any effort on your part? That there in the water, maybe even imperceptible, there is a current moving you along the shoreline and it causes drift. The new series of four sermons we begin today will enable us to explore four points of risk, four possibilities of cultural drift. Just like the sometimes imperceptible current in the ocean our culture causes drift and it isn't usually toward God but away from him.

It may be that all four sermons in this series will hit home with us, or maybe we are plagued with problems in only a couple of the areas, whatever our individual cases this series can be used like a vaccination against trying to be so connected to our culture that we join in the drift.

As you may already be aware, the series is called Practical Atheist.

I imagine if someone asked us in a private conversation,

“Are you an atheist?” it's likely we'd respond by wanting to make sure we understood the question.

“What do you mean?”

“How are you defining ‘atheist’?”

“How dare you even consider such a concept.”

No, I'm not an atheist!

I've believed in God for so long I can't remember what I believed before I believed what I believe!

Today, and for the next three weeks, we want to explore the idea that while we may say, “I believe in God,” what would the evidence reveal? Looking at how we live our lives, where we turn in moments of need, the beliefs that dominate our days, our life practices, our habits, our schedules, how we spend our money, the way we treat our spouse and our friends, do our life choices validate our claim, “I believe in God”?

Like one author put it, “If you were accused of believing in God would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

In just a moment we will begin the first in this series with today’s message, “I believe in God, but I don’t fear Him.” But first let’s pray.

Father, we want our belief to be more than just words. Please come this hour and influence our lives by your Holy Spirit that we might be overwhelmed by you, and that we will not just believe but stand in awe, with a reverential fear of you above every other option. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

What causes you to fear?

Is it the condition of the world—wars, crime, tragedy?

Or maybe it’s the economy—failing banks, falling home values, fading funds in your retirement account?

Are there issues about your health that create fear?

Maybe it’s the safety, or education, or life partner, or just decisions your kids will make!

There are plenty of reasons to fear. In fact at phobialist.com they identify some 556 phobias which have been named in some literature.

There are a few on the list which especially concern me because they could reek havoc with church and church life.

Amaxophobia might interfere with people getting to church it is fear of riding in a car

Agoraphobia—fear of being in crowded, public places really can’t be good for a large service at church.

Maybe more troubling is

Ecclesiophobia—, just straight up, fear of church (I’ve had a touch of this on occasions)

Zeusophobia—fear of God

Fear. Fear is an interesting word. Webster’s gives this definition

fear (fêr), *n.* 1. anxiety and agitation caused by the presence of danger, evil, pain, etc.; dread; fright. 2. awe; reverence. 3. a feeling of uneasiness; anxiety; concern. 4. a cause for fear; danger. *v.t.* 1. to be afraid of; dread. 2. to feel reverence or awe for. 3. to expect with misgiving: as, I fear he'll be late. *v.i.* 1. to feel fear. 2. to be uneasy or anxious.

As interesting as words can be and the emotions they cause to rise in us, all the history of how a word came to be used in the language and sometimes even how the definitions change over time, it is the use of this word “fear” in scripture that has stretched my mind as I’ve worked to prepare today’s message.

Here’s a sample of what I’m talking about:

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

But then we read what the Lord says in

Isaiah 43:1 "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

Solomon, wisest man who ever lived did all this extensive research and experimentation and tried all sorts of stuff and finally comes to his conclusion of the matter by saying . . . Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. Ecclesiastes 12:13

But later near the end of the NT we read:

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. I John 4:18

But then we have the first of those three angels in Revelation 14:7 saying, “Fear God and give him glory for the time has come when he will sit as judge.”

Am I the only one who finds this contradictory at worst and paradoxical at best? What’s up with this?

Maybe the Bible writer moved with fluidity between Webster's first and second definition of the word, between anxiety and awe, between agitation and reverence.

Maybe a hint to help our understanding can be found in another proverb from Solomon.

Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe. Proverbs 29:25

Could it be that, whether we think of fear in the terrified sense or in the reverential sense, that our problem is that we too often have misplaced fear. Not in some phobic mentally unstable way, but that we have just misdirected our fears—been afraid of the wrong things?

We've feared humans and human reactions and human retaliation, and some of the natural consequences of just being human.

There may be

Fear that things will not go well

Fear of being disciplined

Fear not having the answers

Fear of life being cut short

Fear of poverty

Fear that trouble will come to us

Fear we will be humbled

Fear of being dishonored

Fear that sinners will get more of whatever

Fear of others

Fear of punishment

Fear of being found out!

Fear of death

Fear of loosing

Solomon was clear that fear of man is a snare while fear of the Lord is the very foundation of wisdom.

Jesus was clear Luke 12:4-5 where he says: “Dear friends, don’t be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill the body; they cannot do any more to you. But I tell you whom to fear. Fear God, who has the power to kill people and then throw them into hell.”

For me this whole “fear God” thing is a bit scary. And maybe it should be!

I was privileged to grow up in very grace filled home. It was an environment where there was little doubt about beliefs and proper practices, but also where those beliefs could be challenged and the properness of our practices could be argued without any fear of being ostracized.

Early on, from both direct teaching and the examples I observed in our family, I learned of a gracious God who longs to forgive us for our sins, and who wants to be our friend. The whole notion that God should be feared didn’t play well in our home.

But there was something in our home which I feared.

No it wasn’t an abusive parent, it wasn’t some dark family secret (although there were sufficient crazy relatives to qualify).

It was something much more mundane but something I believe illustrates well both sides of the word fear—both the anxiety and agitation caused by the presence of danger, and the awe and reverence side found in Webster’s second definition of the word fear.

My Dad’s job was as an electrician. Because of his education and experience with electricity his fear as anxiety and agitation in the presence of that danger was low, but nevertheless he also had an awe or reverence for this incredible power.

Each Christmas back in the late 50’s and the 60’s we didn’t have those tiny little Christmas lights. Our strings of Christmas lights had small bulbs that actually screwed into small sockets. Dad thought it was important to add to the general Christmas traditions by having us get the thrill or jolt of sticking our finger in one of the small light sockets

of the Christmas lights while they were plugged in and being shocked. I was never forced to do this but did participate on occasion as a kid and as much as I don't like that feeling it was probably a good education. I grew up with a healthy fear of electricity.

PICTURES

When I'm doing some home repair or trying to run a new circuit at home, just replacing a receptacle, I have a healthy fear of electricity. Because I've had some very shocking experiences over the years.

Even though Dad didn't live with an anxiety and agitation kind of fear of electricity—I've watched him test a circuit with his thumb on the ground and his finger making the connection—he still had a healthy awe and reverence kind of fear.

Before I was born he was throwing up switch legs on a transformer on power pole. He grabbed the first switch leg and tossed it to its connection and then the second, but when he grabbed the third to throw it into place the electricity arched and began to electrocute him—he couldn't let go. Fortunately he had the presence of mind to knock the ladder away and his body weight pulled him loose landing him on gentleman working in a manhole below. He only broke his collar bone and burned his finger badly.

Electricity is meant to be enjoyed. We are able to cook our food, use the clothes and dish washers, enjoy heat or AC but it also finds its value for us because we fear it in the sense of respect and reverence and awe.

The electricity that I've been shocked by wasn't doing something to me. It wasn't trying to zap me. It is just an awesome power that is flowing. I don't understand it completely. It's ways are not my ways. As long as I have a healthy "fear" reverence or respect for it I benefit. If at some point I become too familiar with it, or treat it too casually I may find it shocking or even hurtful. But the reality is it never changed.

I remember working maintenance one day when I was a high school student at Georgia-Cumberland Academy. We were repairing some large electric heaters. I remember bending down to just remove a large metal cover and my sweaty shoulder came in contact with this cover with some faulty wiring and I suddenly got a jolt of electricity that effectively threw me several feet away.

The electricity wasn't out to get me but my casual handling of this powerful resource ended up with me getting a jolt.

Today we live in a very casual culture. Many of the formalities of earlier times have been set aside. Part of this may be the effect of the melting pot as various cultures merge into a new one some of the formalities of the old don't transfer to the new. It happens in everything from how we eat our food, to the way we dress, to how we speak to one another.

I was watching a 1930's news reel of a New York street scene, and I noticed that almost every man had on a coat tie and hat. Not too long ago I went to court to contest a citation. I wore a dark suit but I was astounded at the not just casual but extra casual attire people were comfortable wearing to their day in court. I was the exception and in fact was three times mistaken for being an attorney, one of those three by the judge hearing my plea. We live in a casual culture, it isn't good or bad, right or wrong it is just the way things are today.

And part of this casual atmosphere has influenced the church. Over the last several decades the focus on God has been to recognize him as our friend.

I've heard sermons about God as papa. Imaginative writings of a person running and jumping up into God's lap. In our attempt to understand the Holy, Awesome, Eternal, Transcendent God of the universe we have recreated him in our image. We've taken him from the high church, transcendent cathedrals where he seems almost inaccessible, and we've put him in store fronts, and street corners.

We have, not just in our local church, but by in large in the American Christian Church we have emphasized what was missing, the immanence of God. He is with us. In Jesus He became one of us. Jesus, God incarnate, says I no longer call you servants but friends.

We might characterize it simplistically as moving from an Old Testament God who when he comes near terrifies people to a New Testament God who reveals the very essence of God's character of Love in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What I want us to grasp is that no matter how casual in the sense of accessible God is to us, sin cannot exist in the presence of God.

Sin is this short circuit that causes the power of God to appear to zap things. That power that is meant to produce joy and peace and security and love and every good and perfect thing that can be imagined simultaneously seeks to remove everything that doesn't produce joy and peace and security and love and every good and perfect gift. Back to electricity.

With a sense of awe and reverential fear electricity can make our homes warm in the winter and cool in the summer. It can enable us to connect to the internet and watch TV and cook our food that has been preserved in our freezers or refrigerators. When darkness comes we don't worry but simply flip a light switch and this awesome power that can kill us comes right into our homes and gives us life.

I Believe in God but I must remember that my only qualification for being in the presence of God without it being destructive to me is that my life is insulated by Christ's and His righteousness.

One of the most important tools in an electrician's tool pouch is a pair of "linesman's pliers." All pliers are not created equal. What makes the linesman's pliers perfect is the insulation that covers the handles. I can handle "hot" electrical wires, even cut through an electrical wire and blow the circuit breaker all without being burned or shocked because the handles are covered with insulation.

Listen God seeks you right now. The all powerful, holy, completely awesome God of the universe seeks you. He is raw power that is beyond our comprehension. And if you are living on your own, if you are trusting in your self, if you are believing that your good behavior puts God in your debt or qualifies you to be casual with him, and you fear what people can do to you then you are not fearing what's worth fearing and you are at risk of that which was meant to bless your life having the opposite effect.

As surely as I live, says Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live. Turn! Turn from your wickedness, O people of Israel! Why should you die?" Ezekiel 33:11

Dad didn't almost get electrocuted that day on the pole because the electricity was mad at him.

He almost lost his life because he didn't use an insulated tool, he took the power of electricity to casually, it wasn't the fault of the electricity.

Listen No one is righteous. That's what the Bible says in the Psalms, in Romans and illustrated from cover to cover. If your life is in trouble. If things just don't make sense. If you've tried and failed a billion times to be good. If you've tried to handle hot wires with your bare hands and found life shocking. Recognize the reality that "No one can be made right in God's sight by doing what his law commands." Romans 3:20

But God wants us to enjoy the benefits of His righteousness. So God has set things right and "we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us." Romans 5:1

And Christ becomes the insulation. If we choose to accept Jesus as our Savior as our connection to God and we are hidden, just like a wire is hidden in insulation so it can be useful in the circuit of electricity, we are hidden in Christ and he becomes for us wisdom from God, our righteousness, our holiness our redemption.

If we are outside of Christ,
If we are living with misdirected fear of what people can do to us,

Then the power of God should cause us to fear in our worst and most common use of that word fear and at the very highest level of anxiety.

Hidden in Christ, fearing what separation from God means, the power of God should cause us to fall down in reverence and awe of the God who loves so much he'd be electrocuted for us so we can enjoy his righteousness forever. I believe in God and I fear him.