

## Overcoming Fear

As we observed last week, one of the most common reasons that Christians give for not engaging in personal evangelism is fear. They're afraid that they might not know what to say, that somebody might get mad at them, or that the whole effort might go horribly wrong in some other way. I can certainly identify with this. Back before I became a preacher and had to learn to run studies whether I wanted to or not, I myself was afraid of personal work.

However, simply because this fear is common doesn't make it something we can live with. As Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 1, God hasn't given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and self-control. Our brethren in the first century were bold, even to the point of risking and sometimes sacrificing their own lives. If we want to be like the early disciples, we have to be bold too. Fear isn't a problem, but being paralyzed by our fears certainly is! Let's consider this morning, then, what we can do to overcome fear.

The first thing that will help us to battle and defeat our fears is MORE STUDY. Consider Paul's advice to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15. Before I go on to talk about what this passage does mean, I want to spend a little bit of time talking about what it doesn't mean. In the KJV, the text here says, "rightly dividing the word of truth", and in years past, well-meaning brethren argued from this that we have to know how to divide the Bible into Old and New Testaments, and to recognize that we're under the authority of the second, not the first. In reality, though, that isn't what Paul is talking about at all. After all, when he was writing this, the New Testament as such didn't even exist yet!

Instead, Paul is talking about how we need to train ourselves to correctly use the word of truth. He's comparing the Christian to a workman, a tradesman, somebody who is good with tools. For all of us, the Bible is supposed to be a tool that we can use well enough that we don't have to be afraid of being called on to use it. All of us should aspire to being able to use it to teach any truth and rebut any error.

This begins with regular attendance at church services. Every time the doors are open here, it's an invitation for us to get to know the word a little bit better. When we turn down that invitation, we're acting like we know it all already, which isn't true for any of us!

Similarly, I think there's no substitute for spending time in the word on a daily, regular basis. Reading the Bible by ourselves is the only way we can truly get to know it. This constant contact with the Scriptures will make it a tool that is useful for us, and it will make us into tools that are useful for God. The better we know the Bible, the less we have to worry about.

Second, our fears of evangelism can be relieved through MORE PRAYER. We see Christians in the first century praying for exactly this reason in Acts 4:29-31. I find this prayer all the more impressive when I consider it in its context. This comes right on the heels of Peter and John's first encounter with the Sanhedrin. The rulers of the Jewish nation have just warned them in no uncertain terms that if they continue preaching Jesus, they're going to suffer for it. These are the same people who plotted to kill Jesus, so the apostles know that they ain't fooling. Nonetheless, in the face of certain reprisal, they pray for boldness and then go out and preach with boldness.

Prayer is an amazing tool, friends, and the older I get, the more convinced I become that just about all of us, myself certainly included, don't pray nearly enough. Particularly when it comes to evangelism, we trust in our own abilities rather than seeking God's help, and then, when our own abilities prove inadequate, we get discouraged. That's not God's fault. That's our fault!

Instead, we should take full advantage of prayer's adaptability and flexibility, not least in imitating the apostles' prayer for boldness. We can pray for the courage to go up and welcome a visitor. We can pray for the strength to have that conversation with a friend or loved one that we know we need to have. We can pray for God to support us before a study. If an opportunity brews up out of nowhere, we can pray for a moment before making our defense.

The truth is that all of us are limited people, and if we are relying on ourselves, we should be fearful. However, when we pray and take advantage of God's unlimited power, we can trust in Him and no longer have any reason to be afraid at all.

Third, MORE FAITH will help us to triumph over our fears. Here, consider the insight that Paul gives us into his own thinking in 2 Corinthians 4:13-14. As he explains it, his preaching is motivated by his faith. He is convinced that because God raised Jesus from the dead, He also will raise up Paul and everyone else who is a believer. As a result, Paul is going to try to get as many people to believe as possible so that as many as possible also will share in the resurrection and an eternity spent in the presence of God.

In the Lord's church, we make a big deal out of the idea that true faith is an obedient faith. People who truly believe don't merely sit there like mushrooms. They get up. They act. Because of this, we conclude that baptism isn't somehow separate from faith. It's inextricably linked to it.

However, doesn't exactly the same thing hold true with evangelism? If Jesus has been raised from the dead, obedience to His gospel will lead us to inherit eternal life. If that is true, it is the single most important thing that any of us can know or tell someone else. Souls hang in the balance, eternity hangs in the balance, and all of our other concerns dwindle into insignificance.

My neighbor might not like me if I tell her about Jesus, but the possibility of her not liking me is nothing next to the possibility that she will be saved because I talked to her. The only thing to fear is that she might be lost. If that's not the way that we think, if we are more concerned about our fears than the souls of others, it shows that we truly don't believe that those souls are at risk. Just as others can't logically keep faith separate from their willingness to obey the gospel, we can't logically keep faith separate from our determination to tell others about the gospel. The more we believe, the more we will speak.

Fourth, our fears can be overcome by MORE LOVE. Look at John's discussion of the relationship between love and fear in 1 John 4:18. Love casts out fear, so the presence of fear in us points to an imperfection in our love. The more we love, the less we will be afraid.

The other day, Shawn and I were talking about our children and what we would do for them. He said that if his son were drowning in a river, he would jump in and do his best to save him. This is true even though Shawn doesn't like the water and can't swim a lick. He wouldn't get in that river at any other time, but his love for his son is so great that he would fearlessly risk his life. I think any good father or good mother would say the same thing, and if need be would do the same thing.

This ought to call us, friends, to take a good hard look at ourselves when it comes to seeking the lost. If we have a problem with fear, it follows that we also have a problem with love. We are too wrapped up in our concerns about our reputations and about our feelings, and not nearly concerned enough with others' lives.

That's not the way that our brethren in the first century saw things. Today, it's much easier for us to reach out to the lost than it is to jump into a raging river. After all, we are not risking our lives to proclaim Jesus. However, that's exactly what the apostle Paul and so many others knowingly did. They knew that every time they started preaching in a marketplace or went into the synagogue on the Sabbath, they could get arrested or mobbed as a result. They did it anyway, though, because they loved God and loved others too much to be quiet. Today, do we love others that much?

Finally, if we want to overcome fear, we need MORE ACTION. We see a wonderful example of a man of God who overcame his fears and acted in Nehemiah 2:1-5. Nehemiah is one of my favorite Bible characters, and one of the things that I truly appreciate about him is his honesty about his fear.

In context, he has only recently learned that even though some exiles have returned to Jerusalem, the city itself is still in sad shape. He's gloomy about this, so gloomy, in fact, that when he is waiting on the king, the king notices his sadness and asks about it.

Whew! That's enough to make your knees go wobbly! One simply was not unhappy in the presence of the king of Persia. If you made him unhappy, he would have your head removed from your shoulders, and nobody would say a word about it!

Nehemiah's life is on the line here, and he knows it, but he also knows that this might be his one opportunity to solve the problem. He takes a deep breath, offers a momentary prayer to God, and explains the situation and what he would like to do about it. He doesn't freeze in the moment. He acts.

Sometimes, this is exactly what we need to do—do something. Not only is it the only way to take advantage of the opportunities before us, but it is also the best way to prepare to take advantage of future opportunities. When it comes to evangelism, the first is always the hardest. The more we reach out to others, the more we learn how simple it is, and that we truly don't have anything to be afraid of after all.

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