

"Wanting to Gratify the Crowd"

In our Thursday Bible Study a few weeks ago we studied the topic of the Fear of Man. We can have an inappropriate fear of man. It can come under different labels and in different forms. For younger people, maybe we call it peer pressure. For adults, we might call it people-pleasing. For someone involved in an abusive relationship, we might call it codependent. It can be expressed through a low self-esteem that is always looking to find acceptance and significance through others. It can be expressed through pride and envy where we don't want others to get the praise of men that we think we deserve.

At the end of the day, a sinful fear of man can come in different forms, but it ultimately boils down to putting our trust in others instead of putting our trust in God. We begin to need others, more than we need God, and then those others start to control us. Because we have made some aspect of our relationship with others an idol, we can start to be controlled by man. It can be a vicious cycle, and we can soon find ourselves burdened down with the weight of looking to please, or appease, others.

The problem with the fear of man, besides the fact that it can take away from having God as our ultimate God, is that it can also lead to other sins. We can so fear man that we do *anything* to meet our goals.

I think the fear of man is something behind this passage for today. Jesus is handed over to the Roman governor Pilate by the Jewish religious leaders. They want Pilate to condemn him to death. That is what ultimately happens, sending Jesus to the cross. But as we look at the dynamics of this trial we find both the religious leaders and Pilate himself being fueled more by the fear of man than by the fear of God. Of course this results in sin, just as the fear of man usually does. And so I want us to look at this passage from that perspective. I want to look first at the envious religious leaders. Then I want to look at the crowd pleasing Pilate. And then I want to look at how their actions result in the guilty rebel Barabbas going free. As we see how the fear of man leads to sin, I want us to look inward as well at our own struggles in this area. See how this, along with all our sin, has sent Jesus to the cross. But rejoice in knowing that there is forgiveness in Christ because he went to the cross.

And so let's begin by looking at these envious religious leaders. We are talking in general about the chief priests, scribes, and elders who brought Jesus to Pilate in verse 1. This is the Jewish Sanhedrin, the council that we saw in chapter 14 had Jesus arrested, tried him at night condemning him worthy of death under the religious charge of blasphemy, and is now bringing him to Pilate to hopefully get him crucified. But Pilate knows their motivation. It's envy. Just look at verse 10. It says that Pilate "knew that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy." Pilate specifically attributes the envy to the chief priests, but I'm sure this applies to the scribes and elders as well.

Envy is a form of the fear of man. Just think about envy. Envy is a form of coveting. It's when you look at someone else's advantages or position and want it for yourself. You become jealous of someone else. Here specifically with the chief priests their envy was over Jesus and his growing relationship with the people. In short, they didn't like all the attention that Jesus was getting from the people when he taught. They felt threatened because Jesus was grabbing the

attention they usually got. Worse than that, Jesus' teachings often conflicted with either their teachings or their actions. Jesus even spoke out against their corrupt leadership from time to time. And the people were listening. The people even noticed a difference. Back in Mark 1:22 the people recognized that Jesus' ministry had an authority to it that the scribes did not have. Right from the start of Jesus' ministry, there was a huge contrast between Jesus' ministry and the corrupt leadership and ministry of the chief priests, scribes, and elders. This made them envious of Jesus.

Just remember back to one specific incident between Jesus and the chief priests, scribes, and elders. The cleansing of the temple. Jesus, with great authority and boldness cleansed the temple of all the merchants and money changers. That was back in Mark 11. Let me read you part of that again. Mark 11:17-18, "Then he [Jesus] taught, saying to them, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations"? But you have made it a "den of thieves."' And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy him; for they feared him, because all the people were astonished at his teaching." This is just one example of how the religious leaders were envious of Jesus.

Well how is envy related to the fear of man? Well, the religious leaders were craving the attention and love of the people. You see fear of man is closely related to the love of man. If you want the praise of man, that all falls under the umbrella of sin called the "fear of man." That's what the chief priests, scribes, and elders wanted. They wanted man to praise them. They needed that praise, and they'd do whatever it took to get that praise. If Jesus was redirecting that praise away from themselves, then they'd just have to get rid of Jesus. And so this kind of envy is one way the fear of man can be expressed. We can crave the praise of men so much that it becomes an idol in our lives. We become controlled by it and will go to any means to fulfill this desire.

And that's what happens with the religious leaders. Their envy, their love of man, their fear of man, results in sin. They are doing whatever it takes to get Jesus arrested and killed. Two weeks ago we looked at Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin. We saw how the leaders tried to engineer a guilty verdict by trying to dig up false witnesses to testify against Jesus. They had decided on a verdict guilty of death. They had condemned Jesus of blasphemy. And yet instead of executing the sentence of stoning which the Torah required, they now in this passage turn him over the Romans with a different charge. If they stoned him as God's law required of the nation of Israel at that time, then they might have faced ramifications from the Romans. So instead they hand Jesus over to the Romans with a different charge - the charge of treason. Just look at Pilate's question to Jesus in verse 2. It shows what the charge had now become. "Are You the King of the Jews?"

Now certainly this was a correct title for Jesus as the Messiah. As the Messiah, he is technically the King of the Jews. But certainly Jesus' agenda was not a political one. He was not trying to subvert the Roman government. He had even said previously, give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. But the chief priests obviously would bend the truth and try to pervert justice any way that they could. Verse 3 goes on to say that the chief priests continued to accuse him of many things. And so my point is this. The envy of the religious leaders was a form of the fear of man. And this fear of man was expressed in sin. Sin against Jesus by falsely accusing him, making up charges that weren't really true, and doing whatever they could to get Jesus out of their way. The fear of man can lead to all sorts of sins.

Pilate recognized this in the chief priests. He saw their real agenda and motivation. And yet he too was not free from this common temptation. He too had a

fear of man as we see him give into the crowds, just trying to please them. The fear of man is such a common struggle for all of us, but it can be expressed in so many different ways.

For Pilate, notice first that he was convinced about something. He was convinced of Jesus' innocence. You'll notice that it is really Pilate that is trying to get Jesus released here. The crowds had went to Pilate asking him to release a prisoner as was his custom at the annual Passover feast. And so Pilate thought this could be a simple way to have Jesus released. Of course Pilate made a fatal miscalculation and this plan ended up backfiring on him, but it was an honest attempt by Pilate to free Jesus. In both verses 9 and 12 we see him taking the initiative and trying to get the people to select Jesus as the one to be released in honor of the Passover. Pilate did this it seems, at least in part, because he knew Jesus was innocent.

Verse 10 records part of his reasoning. He recognized that the chief priests were motivated out of envy. In other words, Pilate recognized it was not about a crime Jesus had committed, but about the priests own jealousy against Jesus that had motivated their arresting and bringing Jesus to him. Verse 14 really makes it clear that Pilate recognized Jesus' innocence. When the people cried out to have Jesus' crucified, Pilate asks, "Why, what evil has he done?" Pilate was troubled at the thought of crucifying Jesus because he was convinced Jesus was innocent. If you look at the other gospel accounts of this trial with Pilate, you see the same thing expressed in a number of different ways. Pilate was convinced Jesus was innocent.

So that should settle the matter, right? Pilate, who was the judge of this case, thought Jesus was innocent, and so Jesus should be allowed to go free, right? Well we know that's not what happened. Simply put, Pilate gave into the crowds. Verse 15, "So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified."

At the end of the day, Pilate's actions were motivated more out of the fear of man, than they were out of justice. The crowds were getting more and more restless and unruly. It was already a heated time in Jerusalem because it was the Passover. That's when hordes of Jews made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast. The feast brought a great sense of nationalism to the people, which only reminded them of the fact that they were occupied by the hated Romans. It was always a tough job by the Romans to keep the peace and control of the people. But it was especially a tense time during the Passover. Pilate wouldn't want a riot to happen at any time, let alone at that time during the Passover feast. If he couldn't keep the peace among the people, certainly news would get back to the Emperor and he'd be in trouble. And so we're not sure if his fear of man was more about fearing the crowds or ultimately the emperor, but at the end of the day, his actions were to give into the crowds demands. He looked to gratify the crowds, instead of looking to satisfy justice.

You see again, the fear of man leads to sin. For Pilate this means that he sinned in condemning an innocent man to a horrible death. The innocent Jesus was declared guilty and handed over to go to the cross. Pilate had Jesus scourged according to verse 15. That would have been horrible in and of itself. The Romans whipped with a short whip that had several braided ends on it, that then had sharp objects at each end, like pieces of bone. You would have had your clothes removed so that the whips would meet bare flesh. The Jews practiced this sort of scourging as well. But the Bible required that such scourging be limited to no more than 40 lashes. The Jews, in their typical Pharisaical fashion limited the whipping to 39 times, just to make sure they didn't miscount and accidently exceed God's limit of 40.

However, the Romans had no such law to limit the number of lashes. Pilate had Jesus scourged by the Roman soldiers and then sent off to be crucified. Crucifixion of course was a horrible way to die as well, reserved only for the worse of criminals, where they'd be set up as example for all to see. Pilate chose the fear of man over justice. Even though he was a pagan, he should have still had some fear of God. Be he ultimately chose the fear of man over the fear of God.

And so let me summarize what we've said so far. Both the religious leaders and Pilate were motivated by a form of the fear of man. I've tried to show how the fear of man usually leads to sin. That's the case with the both the chief priests and Pilate. Both of their actions led to condemning Jesus to the death of the cross. But look at what else their fear of man led to. It also led to a guilty man going free.

We don't know a lot about this Barabbas. Verse 7 gives us the background on him. He was a rebel; an insurrectionist. He was involved in some rebellion or riot. In the process he and his fellow rebels committed murder. The way it's described is that Barabbas is not just one of many rebels, but he was probably the ring leader of a group of rebels. And so Barabbas is a rebel and a murderer, and likely one who stirred up the rebellion in the first place. He had already been condemned and was no doubt himself headed to the cross.

But Pilate lets him go free. This is the other side of the coin for Pilate. We already said that it was bad that Pilate condemned the innocent Jesus to his death. But not only that he let this notorious criminal, this murderer, go free. Why didn't Pilate stand up for justice? Isn't that what his job was supposed to be? No, it seems that his people-pleasing won out, and he becomes directly responsible for also letting a known criminal back out onto the streets. If you were a friend or family member of one of the people this man killed, how would you feel about that justice?

But the chief priests are not free from culpability in this either. Their envy, their fear of man, also contributed to Barabbas going free. Verse 11. When Pilate had proposed that Jesus be released, the chief priests stir up the crowd to have them ask for Barabbas instead. Sadly, where were Jesus' disciples now? They could have tried to stir up the crowd in favor of Jesus. But they were not here. They feared man too. They feared that man could throw them into jail too.

But think about what the chief priests are doing. Here they show their true colors. Their envy leads them to stir up the crowds to get a known rebel and murderer released. The word in Greek for the chief priests actions is literally the word you'd use to describe someone stirring up a riot. Essentially they incite the people to riot. Here the chief priests essentially stir up some sort of small riot. They stir up trouble, in order to free a troublemaker. They do this to free a rioter and a rebel. They do this in order to kill one who they claimed to be such a rebel, Jesus. They treated Jesus like a rebel. But of course Jesus wasn't one. If anyone was, it was them in this passage, stirring up the crowds to an injustice!

Of course the crowds ultimately are responsible here too. Here we see the sort of Messiah they'd be more willing to follow. Here we see who is more pleasing to the crowds. One like Barabbas, who was probably a political revolutionary looking to subvert the Romans. Not Jesus. Jesus had a different mission.

And yet Jesus was bound, verse 1. And Barabbas was set free. Jesus hadn't given into the temptation to people please, and now his future was the cross. Even here during his trials, Jesus didn't try to people please. He didn't try to butter up

to the judges. He didn't try to befriend the false witnesses. Instead he sat silent at all the false accusations, patiently tolerating the sins of man. He did this because he wasn't out to please people, he was out to please his father in heaven. Jesus had the fear of God first and foremost. He trusted in his Heavenly Father and in his Father's plan. And it was his Father's plan that he'd be delivered over to sinners, that the Gentiles would put him to death, and then on the third day he'd rise again. This was his Father's plan. And he was pleased to follow it. He looked to please God, not man. And so he patiently endured his arrest, all the false accusations, the several trials, the mockings, the whippings, all the people-pleasing and fear of man. And he would ultimately endure the cross.

Jesus did all this because he feared and trusted his Father in heaven. He sought to please him. And God the Father and God the Son did all this to bring salvation to sinners. Isn't it fitting that a guilty man went free so that the innocent Jesus would go to the cross? Isn't that the picture of what Jesus means for all of us? Jesus came to bring salvation to sinners! To free murderers and rebels. To free people-pleasers and those full of the fear of man. That the offer of salvation could be extended to people like Pilate, and Barabbas, the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, the crowds, and even to you and me. Jesus took our place on the cross.

Because Jesus made it his aim to please and serve God, we can have eternal life. We can be forgiven of all our sins that sent Jesus to the cross. And we can be saved from the punishment of hell and given the reward of heaven. All because of what Jesus did for us. He calls us to turn from our sins and put our trust in him as our Lord and Savior. If we do, then the Bible tells us that we have the free gift of salvation.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, our passage reminds us that the fear of man leads to sin. And in fact it was some of the very sins that sent Jesus to the cross. And yet if we have tasted of the salvation that is in Jesus, he calls us to turn away from our former ways of sin. That includes our fear of man. What does this look like in your life? What ways does the fear of man lead to sin in your life?

Maybe for you its envy or people-pleasing like what we saw in this passage. Maybe for you it's something else. Maybe it's being afraid to reach out to others because they might hurt you? Maybe it means you are running around trying to solve everyone else's problems and taking on more than is wise? Maybe it means that you are enabling someone's sinful addictions or behaviors because you are afraid that lovingly confronting them might mean that they turn away from you? Maybe for you it's being afraid to share your faith with others? Fear of man can come in so many different forms. What does it look like for you?

Ecclesiastes 12:13 says, "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." This is such an important verse. When we are fearing man, we probably aren't fearing God. When we find ourselves controlled by others, it's probably because we've elevated them to an improper status in our lives.

Of course, the word of fear in the Bible, is not just about being afraid. It's about reverence and awe for God. It's about trusting him and serving him. It's about setting God as God in your life. That's where fear of man goes wrong. If we set others as God in our life, then we've gone wrong. What person or people control how you live your life?

On the other hand, as Christians we don't have the option to just disconnect from others. Dealing with the fear of man in our hearts can't be done by just disregarding others as if they aren't important. We can't just ignore them. No,

Ecclesiastes says Fear God, *and* keep his commandments. And what are his commandments? Well the Bible summarizes them as loving God and loving your neighbor. We are to love the Lord our God with our everything, and our neighbor as ourself. And so if we do fear God, we must keep his commandments, and if we do try to keep his commandments, it means we can't just escape from the world. It means we can't *not* be involved in relationships. No, it means we will be involved with other people. We'll become intimately involved with them. We'll be loving them, and serving them, and looking to their needs, not just our own. It means we'll be bearing with each other's burdens. Helping people with their struggles. Leaning on others and having others lean on us. And not just to fellow Christians, but even to non believers. It will be messy at times. It will be hard at times. But loving our neighbor as ourselves is an expression of a Biblical fear of God.

And so God's commandments give us the instructions for how to govern our relationships with others. So we need to study God's Word whenever we find ourselves tempted to the fear of man. We need to ask how God's Word would have us respond in any given situation. If the chief priests had done this, then they should have identified Jesus as the Messiah, not condemn him for blasphemy and turn him over to the Romans. If Pilate had done this, he should have submit to what justice truly demanded and not given into the sinful whims of the people. We too in our relationships need to meditate on God's Word. We need to think through how God's commands direct us in our relationships with others. Sometimes they will help set some important boundaries in our relationships. Other times they will call us to some pretty radical service to those in need. But if we keep God's commandments in how we relate to others, and we do it as an expression of fearing God, then this is a good thing. That honors God. That glorifies him.

Now this means that as we really try to incorporate this into our life, it can be difficult. It can be difficult because sometimes the right action can be done for the wrong reason. The Bible might call us to love someone in a certain way. If we do it because we fear God, then great. But we can also do that same act of love because we fear man. Because we are a people-pleaser. We can do the right thing for the wrong motivation. Secular humanitarians do that. They can do all sorts of good things, but without the goal to serve God. They make mankind their God and the one they serve. But we must Fear God, and keep his commandments.

And so I hope you see that we're talking about God's Word governing how we relate to others. In thought, word, and deed, God's Word tells us how to relate to others. As you reflect on this passage, search your hearts. How are you fearing God and keeping his commandments? And how are you really just fearing man?

Saints, as we strive to serve God in this way, be encouraged. We do this trusting in Jesus. We trust in Jesus who sets us free from our sins, even from our sinful fear of man. And since he bore the sins that resulted from the fear of man, he knows this struggle too. Jesus knows the tension. He knows how our motivations can seem so right from our own eyes. He knows the troubles we have wanting to serve God and then find out as we search our hearts that we really were operating from a fear of man. But there is forgiveness in Christ even in this struggle as well. And there is not only forgiveness, but there is strength. This too is one area where God is growing us. He works on our hearts, through Jesus who knows what it means to face the brunt of the fear of man. Trust in Jesus. Keep turning in faith to him. Look for him to change your hearts from fearing man to fearing God more and more each day. Amen.