

I was brought up hearing the phrase “respect your elders.” Over and over again I heard that phrase repeated by—you guessed it—my elders, my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and any other adults in my life. Yet giving respect to somebody merely on the basis of their age always seemed to be kind of arbitrary and not very smart. Remember, even fools grow old. Age means little when it comes to judging the respectability of individuals. Think about it this way: Where do kids learn most of their bad habits? Their elders. Who exposes kids to violence more times than not? Their elders. I could say more about that, but the point is clear. There are times when adults are not exactly the best role models and therefore younger people should be skeptical about immediately granting them authority or respect.

Not so with God. A friend once shared with me that when he graduated from the sixth grade his father signed the first page of his autograph book in which he collected signatures and messages from teachers and classmates. His father wrote on the first page of that small book in capital letters, these words: MY SON, WHILE CLIMBING THE LADDER OF SUCCESS ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT THERE IS A GREAT BIG MAN UPSTAIRS, GOD. MAY HE FOREVER BLESS YOU. MAY 25, 1970 6:30 A.M.

His father’s point wasn’t that God was no more than a man, but that God was, is, and ever shall be. God is over and above all of our human endeavors whether we like it or not. Through his father’s actions and words, my friend got a message similar to what I sense Peter is trying to convey with his phrase “*reverent fear*” in today’s Scripture from 1 Peter.

Preachers are often tempted to rush in with a disclaimer that this *fear* Peter mentions does not mean to be afraid of God, but to be respectful of God and to show God reverence. But I believe Peter isn’t asking believers to merely respect God because he is older than everybody else—the ultimate elder. We water down the Hebrew understanding of “the fear of the Lord” too much when we leave it at people should “respect God.” The Hebrew notion of the “fear of the Lord” means more than mere respect for God.

The Hebrew notion of “fearing” God means a living awareness of the *mysterium tremendum*, an abiding sense of God’s awesome power. Moses sees it and hears it at the burning bush and he takes off his shoes. It catches hold of David when the Ark of the Covenant is returned and he dances before the Lord. Isaiah latches on to it in the temple when he hears the divine summons, “*Whom shall I send and who will go for us.*” Isaiah shouts, “*Send me!*” Mary receives it in the glorious announcement of an angel and she sings, “*My soul doth magnify the Lord.*” Is it any wonder that such fear is mentioned in this text which focuses on the awesome resurrection of Jesus from the dead? How in the world can we ever allow ourselves to get used to such a marvelous and earth-shattering event?

To “fear God” is to be in touch with the awesomeness of God. This has benefits for the way we live our lives. Perhaps the best benefit is this: An awesome God offers an awesome love. If I know that I am loved by God, I know that I am the recipient of what the *Spinners*, in one of their old songs, called “Mighty Love.”
*A mighty love/Will sometimes make you weep and moan/A mighty love/
 You’ll sit all day by the telephone/Cause you’re all alone/You need a mighty love.*

We don’t have to be crushed by a low self-esteem, because God loves us. We don’t have to make others

feel bad in order to make ourselves feel good, because God loves us. We don't have to be afraid of the challenges of life, because God loves us with *a mighty love*. And in turn...

Reverent fear has the power to make us fearless. If anyone knew what it was to grow into heartfelt fearlessness, it was Peter. On the night Jesus was killed he expressed a pebble of denial, but after Jesus' resurrection Peter becomes a great rock of courage that Jesus had envisioned earlier in their ministry together.

In the book *Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth* by Derrick Bell, Bell describes a young writer named Alice Walker who was asked by a leading national magazine to write about growing up in the South. Though Walker was pleased with what she produced, the magazine suggested major revisions. Walker refused. In a showdown meeting, Walker was informed that she didn't understand—the piece would have to be changed or it would not be published. After considering the positive impact such an article would have on her budding career and weighing that against her integrity as a writer, Walker responded, “It's you who do not understand. All I have to do in life is save my soul” (Derrick Bell, *Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2002, p. 62).

Living in *reverent fear* of God unleashes us to be God's truly fearless children. In this season of the resurrection we would do well to appreciate Peter's acknowledgment of *reverent fear* and the power of such fear to raise us to live in the light, the power, and the spirit of Christ's resurrection.

Going back to verse 17 we also see that God the Father judges each person's work impartially. The world, however, is highly partial and partisan. Have you noticed that? These believers knew fear and they feared for their lives because of the sharply partisan persecution of the Roman government. They also knew the fear of God. In God they put their faith and hope. It was a reverent fear. As believers we have a dual nature. As long as we live here on earth in flesh and blood we have a sinful nature. This sinful nature is prone to wickedness and evil. This sinful nature does not want to do the good we ought to do. This sinful nature needs to heed God's law. God's law says do this and do not do that. God's law points out our sins. God's law can strike “the fear of God” into our hearts. “*The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread,*” says Isaiah the prophet (8:13). This is the fear of God accompanied by the fear of God's absolute law.

Christians are made into a new creation, born again by water and the spirit. This new creation wants to follow God and do the good we ought to do. This new creation does not serve the Savior out of mortal fear and dread but because of reverent fear and awe. Why do we fear, love and respect God above all things? Because God bought us with a price. As the writer of Hebrews expresses it, “*How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*” (9:14). Isaiah describes the living God as one to be feared, because of the law. Peter describes our living God as one to be feared reverently, because through the gospel he is the one who saves. The blood of Christ saves us from death.

Now our lives are drastically and dramatically changed. No longer do we selfishly look out only for ourselves. No longer do we selfishly treat others badly. Jesus' life, blood, death, and resurrection give us reason to love our neighbors as ourselves. “*Jesus Christ...gave himself for us to redeem us from all*

wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” says Paul in Titus 2:14. “Eager to do what is good” should be the motto of every believer in Christ. This faith and hope in God, remember, makes us temporary residents here. “*Live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear*” says Peter. “Being eager to do what is good” can seem “foreign” in the eyes of the world.

There may be times that we face despair, discouragement, and depression. Take out your Bible and read and reread the message of hope in this letter from God through Peter. In the darkest, early days of Christianity, God through the apostle Peter encouraged these believers with a message of hope. Hope in this life, hope in this world, hope in ourselves, or hope in the experts only leads to despair and discouragement. But as verse 21 reminds us, “*YOUR FAITH AND HOPE ARE IN GOD.*” God bought you with a price—the holy, precious blood of Christ through his sacrificial sufferings and death. Our response is to live lives here in *reverent fear*.

At the January 2017 March for Life in Washington, D.C., Bishop Vincent Matthews, who is leader of a predominantly African-American denomination, told tens of thousands standing before him: “There are a lot of Christophobic people in this nation. Christophobic people who fight against the Gospel.” What an odd thing to say! After hearing for the first time the word, “Christophobic,” I consulted my dictionary where I read that a PHOBIA is “a persistent, irrational fear of a specific object, activity, or situation that leads to a compelling desire to avoid it.” Is Bishop Matthews on to something? Is there a measure of “Christophobia” not only in our nation but also inside our churches?

What came to my mind next was the research conducted by one of America’s largest congregations. They recently learned that 80% of their 20,000 members regarded intimacy with Christ as their greatest fear in the Christian life! Afraid of intimacy with Christ! Couldn’t that be called “Christophobia?” And maybe there are far more people, Christian people, struggling with a “persistent, irrational fear” of God’s Son that “leads to a compelling desire to avoid” getting too deeply involved with him. Are you wrestling in some way with Christophobia? How consistently and intimately engaged are you with the Risen Lord? Are you holding back and avoiding going deeper with him?

Instead of being Christophobic, we must live our lives in *reverent fear*, aware that we are in the presence of God and that we live in the shadow of eternity. None of us should squander the gift of God in Christ because we are afraid. Live in *reverent fear* because life is of infinite worth—both the life of Christ and your life. Amen.