

Addicted to Approval

Proverbs 29:25

Mark D. Vroegop

*The fear of man lays a snare,
But whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.
Prov 29:25*

“When you live your life in light of what others think of you, you end up hating them.”

I learned this lesson the hard way. I was in college, and I was a part of a student-elder council that provided spiritual guidance and direction for the student body. We were responsible to lead the morning and evening worship on-campus services every Sunday and Wednesday. A regular role for me was giving the announcements. Over the course of a few weeks I just couldn't get the announcements right. A little mess-up here, a missed word there, and it was adding up. I reviewed my announcement notes, and I walked to the pulpit determined that I was not going to mess up. I was going to do them perfectly.

I was to give an announcement about one of the fraternity groups on campus. Their name was two Greek letters. I said, “The men's fraternity, Alpha Chee, will be hosting a dinner....” But I mispronounced “Kai” and said, “Chee” instead. The student body snickered and laughed. I was mortified. Actually, I was mad – really mad.

I gave up. I met with the Campus Pastor and, speaking out of my frustration, said, “I am not doing announcements anymore. I'm done. If the student body is going to laugh at something like that, then you need to find someone else.” I thought of a hundred reasons why this was the best course of action, and I convinced myself that it right. A few days later, I was sharing my frustration with my advisor. He said something that I've never forgotten: “Mark, when you live your life in light of what others think of you...you end up hating them.” God used that experience and his words to uncover a deadly foe – **the fear of man.**

During the month of August we are going to look at the issue of approval and our potential addiction to it. I want to look at this subject because it seems to me that I see the fear of man or approval addiction too often in my life and the lives of others. I'm sure that you have said, “Why does it matter what they think of me?” And I'm also sure that you know someone who just “sucks the life” out of relationships because he or she seems to crave the approval of others. There are times when I feel like the fear of man is an epidemic, especially in the church.

My hope and prayer is that this series will be the start of life-long journey in dealing with this critically important issue. Here's an overview of where we are going over the next four Sundays:

- "Addicted to Approval"
- "Seduced by the Idol of Approval"
- "The Triumph of the Gospel Over Approval"
- "Loving People for God's Glory, Not Using Their Approval for Mine"

My aim for this series is to get at the root of what causes us to become addictive to approval, and then I hope to point you in two directions. First, I hope to point you vertically to Christ and have you learn to fear, trust, and love him. Second, I hope to point you horizontally toward people and have you love them. Dealing with our addiction to approval should bring us back to loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-38).

What is the fear of man?

Let's begin by figuring out what we actually mean by the phrase fear of man. There are a number of other phrases that you could use to describe this issue. For instance you could also think of this as pleasing people, wanting their approval, trying to make others happy with you. In psychological terminology it is often described as an inferiority complex, low self-esteem, codependency, or love hunger.

The phrase "fear of man" implies something negative, and it usually is. However not all "fear of man" is necessary bad. Like so many things in life, something bad develops from something that good. The fear of man is not always bad or sinful. In fact, we are commanded to live in such a way that pleases other people. Let me give you a few examples:

- Children are commanded to please their parents: *"A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother" (Proverbs 10:1)*
- God has ordained rulers and authorities for whom fear is appropriate and right: *"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval (Rom. 13:1-3)*
- Servants or employees are to work in such a way that they bring pleasure to their earthly masters: *"Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, 10 not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior" (Titus 2:9-10)*
- Marriage includes a commitment to pleasing one another: (Paul talking about the benefits of singleness) *"The married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided...the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband" (1 Cor 7:33-35).*

- In our Christian liberty and in our evangelism we must consider what is pleasing to others: *“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, 33 just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved” (1 Cor 10:31-32).*

As you can see pleasing people, seeking their approval, and even living in the fear of man can be a good thing – even commanded. Like so many issues in life, sin distorts the good gifts and desires that come from God. That’s important to know so that you realize that the problem isn’t people or their approval; it is being an approval junkie that is the problem.

When does approval go bad?

The fear of man, pleasing people, and trying to make others happy becomes sinful when it becomes an **inordinate desire**. This is a very important point so don’t miss it. Approval becomes bad when it becomes too important. It becomes wrong when the motive and expression become corrupted. Lou Priolo, in his book People Pleasing, says that these desires “are wrong because you have longed for them too intently. What may have begun as a legitimate God-given desire has now metastasized and mutated in an inordinate one.”¹

What does sinful fear of man look like? It usually has two different manifestations: 1) an insatiable desire for approval or 2) the controlling fear of being rejected. Again the key is the fact that this desire is insatiable. You could think of it as “love tanks with a leak” or that the fear is controlling: “when you live your life in light of what others think, you end up hating them.

So how do you know if you struggle with the fear of man? Let me share with you a few of diagnostic questions²:

- *Have you ever struggled with the peer pressure? Peer pressure is often a euphemism for the fear of man.*
- *Are you over-committed? Do you find that it is hard to say no even when wisdom indicates that you should?*
- *Do you “need” something from your spouse such that it controls you? Do you “need” your spouse to listen to you? Respect you?*
- *Is self-esteem critical for you? Chances are that your life revolves around what others think. You fear their opinions. You need them to fill you up.*
- *Are you always second-guessing decisions because of what other people might think? Are you afraid of making mistakes that will make you look bad in other people’s eyes?*
- *Do you experience “love hunger”? If you need others to fill you, you are controlled by them.*

¹ Lou Priolo, Pleasing People – How not to be an approval junkie, (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2007), 37.

² These questions are a composite of two lists from Ed Welch’s book When People are Big and God is Small (P&R Publishing, 1997) and Lou Priolo’s book.

- *Do you get easily embarrassed? If so, people and their perceived opinions probably define you.*
- *Do you ever lie, especially the little white lies? Lying and other forms of living in the dark are usually ways to make ourselves look better before other people.*
- *Are you jealous of other people?*
- *Do other people often make you angry or depressed?*
- *Do you avoid people? Even though you might not say that you need people, you are still controlled by them.³*

Do you see yourself in at least one of those descriptions? I don't know about you but I feel like I see this all over the place. It almost seems as if it is a part of how the world works! And unfortunately it creeps into the lives of Christians and even the church.

The fear of man is the inordinate desire to have the approval of others, and it rears its ugly head in many different ways.

Freedom from Approval Addiction

I want us to be set free from this trap and learn to love God and others like the Bible commands. I want to point you up (love God) and push you out (love others) so that you can be free! Let me give you three thoughts that come out of Proverbs 29:25 that I hope will set you on a new path for being free from the problem of the approval of others. I take each of these truths from the most important words in our text and their meanings:

1. Realize that this is a worship issue

As you look at Proverbs 29:25, I think that you can fairly easily see a parallelism in the passage. Fear is contrasted to trust, and snare to safe. Like so many Proverbs there is a problem and solution identified in just 15 words.

The Hebrew word for fear in this passage is used often translated as fear, anxiety, trembling, or shaking. If you were to look up the various references, you would find that part of the power of the fear, anxiety, or trembling is object that is causing it. For example:

- 1 Samuel 14:15 – the Philistines become exceedingly afraid because of an earthquake
- Daniel 10:7 – men tremble and run away because of their close proximity to a vision that Daniel saw
- Ezekiel 26:16 – the nations will tremble at the judgment of God upon Tyre

The focal point of the passages is the object, person, or force that is causing the person to tremble. The strength of fear is the object behind it. People tremble for a reason.

³ Edward Welch. When People are Big and God is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1997. p. 14-17

Fear gives the object power, and often this is appropriate because the object is worthy of the fear. Let me give you an example. A mouse or spider has very little power or strength unless you see one in a place that it shouldn't be. There have been many times that I have "rescued" my wife from a spider. In the case of the fear of man it gives people power over us that they shouldn't have. We stand in awe of something that we shouldn't. In other words we give people power that they don't deserve, and this begins in the heart.

In Galatians 1, Paul leads off his letter with an affirmation of where his calling really comes from. He says, "*Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead).*" Getting that right, Paul was able to say, "*For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ*" (Gal 1:10). It is very important for you to see that verse 10 does not make sense without the perspective of verse 1.

The opposite of trusting in God is fearing man. And if you boil everything down it comes down to an issue of worship or affection (what I love) or what really moves me. In other words, the fear of man is basically a worship issue. It "includes being afraid of someone, but it extends to holding someone in awe, being controlled or mastered by people, worshipping other people, putting your trust in people, or needing people."⁴ At its root (and we will look at this next week) the fear of man is an idolatry issue.

Dealing with our approval addiction means coming to terms with what is going on inside the heart. When we start to tremble in the presence of others or living in light of what they people think of us we need to ask ourselves, "What is going on in my heart right now?" "What do I really want?" The fear of man is ascribing power to people that really only belongs to God. When the fear of man takes over we end up (to borrow from Welch's title) making people big and God small.

2. See how this inappropriately controls you

In my study of the word for fear, I discovered another word that I think captures this second point really well: **panic**. Dictionary.com defines panic as "a sudden overwhelming fear...that produces hysterical or irrational behavior." When panic happens people respond in ways that are not normal and even destructive. Last week for a panic ensued at a German festival as people were crowding into a tunnel. In the rush to exit, 18 people were killed. That is what panic does. It causes you to act in a manner that doesn't even make sense. Panic is illogical. Being addicted to approval causes a panic in the heart, and it causes us to lose control.

Our approval addiction begins by standing in awe or ascribing power to something that doesn't deserve it. And then it masters us. In subtle or brazen ways what people think of us, their approval, being liked, the affirmation of others, or the lure of popularity can take over our lives and entrap us.

⁴ Welch, p. 14.

Let me ask you a few questions: I wonder how many husbands, if you were honest, are really afraid of their wives? Or how many wives are afraid of their husband? I wonder if you can be honest with your spouse? Can you confront him or her? Can you address a sticky issue? Can you talk about hard things? Or have you found convenient strategies to deal with problems and your fear of man (or woman)?

Do you use subtle humor to communicate your points? That way you can say, "I was just kidding" if they get too upset. Do you share what others have said about something when you believe the same thing? You just don't want to be the bad guy. Do you bend the truth (exaggerate or minimize) because you are afraid about how they'll respond?

The fear of man is a snare in that it controls you. The second warning in this text is that the fear of man "lays a snare." It is a dangerous trap. The word means a noose that can be put around the neck of an animal or hook for the nose. Both ideas emphasize the nature of control.

The word for "snare" is used in scary ways in the book of Proverbs:

- For how the wicked is trapped by his wicked words – "The wicked is snared by the transgression of his lips: but the just shall come out of trouble" (Prov 12:13)
- For the consequences of sinful living that lead to death – "The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death" (Prov 13:14)
- For making quick promises or oaths without thinking – "It is a snare to say rashly, "It is holy," and to reflect only after making vows" (Prov 20:25)
- For learning the ways of the wicked man – "An evil man is ensnared in his transgression, but a righteous man sings and rejoices" (Prov 29:6)

The approval junkie is so controlled by the fear of what others think of him that it directly impacts relationships, especially close relationships. The person is often guilty of the following:

- Rarely confronts sin in the life of another believer
- Struggles challenging or questioning the opinions of others
- Prematurely terminates conflict by yielding, withdrawing or changing the subject
- Rarely reveals to others the truth about who they are on the inside
- Steers conversations away from topics that might cause people to realize who he really is
- Shades the truth in order to "not offend others"
- Fishes for compliments
- Frequently puts herself down in the hope that others will disagree⁵

This is a dangerous trap, and it destroys relationships. Approval addiction will ruin relationships because:

⁵ Priolo, 29.

1. It is not their role; no one can take the place of God in your life
2. You will never be satisfied or even end up hating them because they can never give you what you want
3. You will suck the life out of people and they'll avoid you
4. People are imperfect and they are going to disappoint you

Welch describes people who fear man this way: "They are fairly sure that God loves them, but they also want or need love from other people – or at least they need *something* from other people. As a result, they are in bondage, controlled by others and feeling empty. They are controlled by whoever or whatever they believe can give them what they think they need. It is true: what or who you need will control you."⁶

3. Learn to live on the hope that is found in trusting the Lord

"The fear of many lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe." The opposite of the fear of man is trusting in the Lord. That is what the verse says. People who are filled with the fear of man do not trust the Lord. You cannot fear man and trust God at the same time. It is impossible. Remember Paul's words from Galatians 1:10, "*For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.*"

The word "trust" means to hide for refuge or to be bold or confident in something. It is closely tied to the idea of hope, and it means to be persuaded about something such that you rely upon it. From a spiritual perspective, those who trust in God place their confidence in Him; they hope in God; they rely upon him.

The book of Psalms uses the word trust frequently and makes the point that trust is directly related to a knowledge of God's grace. In short, in order to trust in God you have to know Him. You have to know His grace and mercy (hesed in Hebrew), or trusting Him will never happen.

The LORD also will be a refuge for the oppressed, A refuge in times of trouble. And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; For You, LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You (Ps 9:9-10).

The righteous shall be glad in the LORD, and trust in Him. And all the upright in heart shall glory (Ps 64:10)

The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The LORD is for me among those who help me; Therefore I shall see my desire on those who hate me. It is better to trust in the LORD Than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the LORD Than to put confidence in princes. (Ps 118:6-9)

Do you see what the Scripture is saying here? If you don't know God, you will never trust Him. Instead you will try to fill the God-size hole in your heart with things that do not fit. Unmasking the fear of man begins with understanding that fearing man and trusting God do not go together.

⁶ Welch, p. 14.

You see, we need to run to him. We cannot just stop fearing man; we have to run to greater object of worth, awe, and trembling. The question is where are you going to run when you begin to feel the fear of man well up inside of you?

The word safe means to be inaccessibly high. It is used of a lofty city (Isaiah 26:5) and high walls (Prov. 18:11).⁷ The idea is that with the height of the city comes safety or even exaltation.

Those who trust in the Lord are able to have their hearts exalted. In the midst of seasons of fear they can run to the Lord and be secure. You see the fear of man is not conquered by saying, "Who cares what they think of me!" That can just be empty, arrogant words that lead to ripping apart other people (ie: "They are dumb anyways..."). Real safety, real security comes from fearing God.

Now two weeks from now we'll see how specifically this relates to the gospel and what it means to find your real identity in Christ. But for now I simply want you think with me about the connection between your relationship with the Lord and your desire for the approval of others.

It may be that you've run from relationship to relationship, from job to job, from marriage to marriage. It may be that you can look back at the history of your life and see the relationship body-bags that you left behind. It may be that, if you are honest, you can see that your personal intensity and even your anxiety comes from a addiction to approval. You have to have people like you, and it's killing you.

If being an approval junkie means that 1) there is worship problem and 2) a control problem, then I have wonderful news: Jesus Christ came to make you fully approved before God. The ultimate hope doesn't come from you thinking better about yourself, but thinking and focusing more on him! 1 John 1:18 says, "Perfect love casts out fear!"

So here's my challenge: All of us struggle with the fear of man at some level, and the question is what will you do when it comes? Where will you run?

At our house in Michigan, my outdoor running route brings me next to a house that has what must be a 120 lb Rotwieler dog. Every time I went by the house he jumped out of his dog house, and I would hear "zipppp" of the pulley. His bark was scary, and I listened carefully for the zip to "clank" against the end of his dog wire. I was afraid that one day that line may break and I would have to outrun this scary dog. So, I devised a plan. My plan is to first scream as loud as I can and then run as fast as I can to the other neighbor's car that is always outside. I rehearsed it in my mind many times. Scream, run, and climb. I'm going to somewhere that is inaccessibly high to that dog.

My point is this: where are you running when the fear of man hits? Do you even think to run to God? Oh that we could turn our Bible reading and our prayer time into a sanctuary from the fear of man.

⁷ Harris, Archer, and Waltke. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament Vol. II. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 1980. p. 871.

How do we deal with our approval addiction? First by seeing it for what it is. The fear of man is using people to get what I want instead of loving people while giving God what He deserves: glory!

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