

Luke 23:39-41
Don't You Fear God?
Ironies of the Passion #6
March 16, 2016

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." (NIV84)

Nah, not really.

No, clearly the other criminal didn't fear God. Clearly the other criminal didn't fear anyone. He hadn't feared his fellow citizens when he was committing his crimes of...well, the Bible doesn't actually spell out the crimes of the two men who were crucified with Jesus. However, the Greek word that is used to describe them implies not only stealing but also violence, and possibly even murder.

Whatever his crimes had been, fear of his fellow citizens and even fear of the Roman government hadn't been enough of an issue to cause him to pull back from his course of action.

Even now, hanging on a cross and facing certain death, he wasn't showing any fear, choosing to use his remaining hours on this earth to "hurl insults" at Jesus.

Actually, it's a bit ironic that the first criminal asks this question--because the first criminal had done the same things as the other one. He had shown a similar lack of fear, committed similar crimes, and received an identical punishment. More than that, the gospel of Mark indicates that initially this man had also joined in the mockery and "*heaped insults*" (Mark 15:32) on Jesus.

He didn't fear anyone, either.

But at some point and for some reason it dawned on him that this man being crucified next to him was sent from God and had the power to grant--or deny--access to the kingdom of God.

And that was when he finally began to fear. The key word in his question, "*Don't you fear God?*" is the last one--"God." For him that changed everything. Perhaps he could look at any mere human being and not have fear--even as they were nailing him to a cross. After all, they could do nothing more than what Jesus described when he said, "*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body...*" (Matthew 10:28).

But the person to be really afraid of? Jesus said--and this criminal realized--that it was "*the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*" (Matthew 10:28)

At some point and in some way this man had realized that the person on the next cross over was the One who could destroy--or not destroy--both soul and body in hell.

How had he come to this realization? The Bible doesn't tell us, but we can make a guess. Since the Romans didn't crucify their own citizens, this man was likely a Jew. Since he was a Jew, he had probably received some form of religious instruction during his childhood. Add to that Jesus had become, at the very least, one of the more famous people in Israel during the past three years. Therefore the man had probably heard about some of the claims that Jesus had made, as well as some of the miracles that Jesus was reported to have performed.

He had likely heard some of the things that Jesus had said to the people on the way to Calvary. He had likely heard Jesus' most unusual words as he was being nailed to the cross, in which he actually asked God to forgive those responsible.

At some point, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, the realization kicked in and overwhelmed him: This was God himself next to him!

And that frightened him.

Especially as he hung on the precipice of death, and faced the possibility--yes, the near certainty--that both his soul and body were going to be destroyed in hell for what he had done. He knew that not only was he currently, as he said, "*getting what our deeds deserve*" from the Roman government and that his sentence was a just one, but that he was "*under the same sentence*" as all sinners are from God and that his deeds deserved eternal punishment of body and soul in Hell.

You'd have to be an idiot not to realize that and not to fear that. And apparently the other criminal was an idiot. You can almost hear the incredulity in the words of the first criminal: "*Don't you fear God?*"

It's an incredulous question that might well be asked of us. If people were to look at us and our lives and some of the things we do and say, they might well ask with amazement, "Don't you fear God?...I know that you claim to do so. But your actions and your words indicate otherwise."

Are they right? Do our words and actions often indicate that we think we're untouchable? That we don't truly fear God? That we think we can more or less do as we please, and get away with it?

We sometimes talk about that sort of attitude in others--an attitude in which the confession of their lips on Sundays is in conflict with their sinful words and actions during the rest of the week--and we talk about how "those people" damage Christianity in the eyes of others.

It's a fair point.

But if that's the only point we see in that situation, we're missing the far greater point, and we're really answering "Don't you fear God?" with a resounding, "Nah, not really."

The biggest problem, the biggest danger when I confess one thing but live another is not that others might be confused by the dissonance between the confession that Christians make and the lives that Christians live.

No, the biggest danger is that you and I will one day be, like the criminals on the cross, be punished justly and get what my deeds deserve.

When you use God's name to express irritation, frustration, exasperation, or even excitement..."Don't you fear God?"

When we carry a grudge against a fellow Christian--or for that matter, against anyone that Jesus loved enough to die for on that cross but we don't love enough to forgive--"Don't you fear God?"

When we covet what others have, when we envy their blessings and send the unspoken message that God messed up by not giving someone like us more blessings..."Don't you fear God? Or do you instead fear him so little that you actually presume to sit in judgment on him?"

And as much as we'd like to claim otherwise at those times, our words and actions have shown at those times that our answer to the criminal's question is, "Nah, not really. That other criminal that you're addressing... Yeah, he'd *better* fear God. But I don't really have anything to worry about."

There are a lot of reasons why that attitude exists in us. Sometimes part of the reason is that we don't fear God anywhere near as much as we fear the disapproval of our peers--and therefore we do whatever it takes to get it--even though they are only capable of destroying the body or the reputation.

Sometimes part of the reason is because we think that there will always be time to get it together. After all, look at the criminal on the cross. Didn't he come around at the end and get it together just under the wire, and wasn't he promised and didn't he then receive "paradise" from Jesus?

That depends on which criminal you're looking at, right? Don't you fear that you will end up like the other criminal, the one who showed no fear right up to the end and is now suffering forever in Hell? Or don't you fear that your end might come suddenly, before you have time to stare into the face of death and reassess and repent?

I think another reason we are tempted to not fear God is because we don't understand his standards—or we understand them, but refuse to accept that they could actually be his standards. God's standard is perfect fear/respect for him—the type of fear that leads someone to obey every single one of his commands every single hour of the day.

I haven't done that, and neither have you. And therefore because I have so often failed to fear God, I ought to be very, very afraid of God.

And my only hope is that the criminal's question "Don't you fear God?" is answered correctly--and by the person of whom it really should have been asked. Although the question was directed at the criminal two crosses down, the person to whom it should have been directed--because his answer was the one that mattered to the criminal who was asking, and his answer is the one that matters to us--is the man next to that criminal—Jesus.

Jesus' answer is "Yes." Yes, Jesus feared God. In fact, he had so much fear/respect for God and his holy laws that he didn't even dare to give in to Satan's temptation in the wilderness when he was hungry because he had been without food for days. Satan urged him to not fear God by taking matters into his own hands and creating bread for himself even though God had not chosen to give him any. Jesus rejected the Devil's temptation.

When he was on the cross being mocked by so many—even by two criminals who were taunting him by telling him that if he was so mighty, then he should prove it by saving himself and coming down from the cross, Jesus feared God by continuing to carry out the task that God had given to him.

And when those three hours of darkness came over the land, Jesus not only feared God, but he was also afraid of God. Because there he suffered the full and fearsome wrath of God for all of our sins.

And because all that had been promised and was happening, the criminal who asked the question feared God, but he was not afraid of God. He knew that Jesus had taken away all of his sins, and therefore he had was not afraid of God even as he faced very imminent death and what comes after.

He knew that he had a Savior in Jesus who had won the kingdom of Heaven, and therefore he knew that he could count on this Savior to take him there. That's why he said, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*"—and it's why Jesus responded, "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*" (Luke 23:42-43)

So what's your answer to the question, "Don't you fear God?"

If you're being asked if you have shown proper fear/respect for God and his commands, then our answer has to be a sad, "No, I have not feared God."

If you're being asked if you realize that those sins against the One who can destroy both soul and body in Hell do indeed condemn you to Hell, then our answer has to be a terrified, "Yes, I am deeply afraid of God."

But for us, that is not the end of our answer, for our answer concludes with: "Yes, my sins make me deeply afraid of God. But I also know that Jesus has taken away those sins, and therefore I agree with what is written in Isaiah: *'Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.'* (Isaiah 12:2). No, I am not afraid of God, because I know what Jesus has done for me, I know that he will remember me, and I know that I will be with him in paradise." Amen.