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# Teaching the **FAITH**

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## *Love and Fear*

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June 21, 2026: 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Jeremiah 20:10-13; Romans 5:12-15; Matthew 10:26-33

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An unwise man of the Renaissance infamously posed the question, “Is it better to be feared or loved?” Today’s Gospel confounds worldly wisdom in speaking of both love and fear in our relationship with God. Jesus wants us to keep before our eyes that he is both judge and merciful savior of our souls.

*Fear no one.* In Jesus’s time as in ours, the world was a dangerous place, and its great and powerful relied upon their ability to instill fear in others. The Lord dismisses fear of those who threaten merely to kill the body because the life of the soul far surpasses it. He also instructs the Twelve not to fear because *nothing is concealed that will not be revealed*. The sense of justice that is innate in us, namely, that men must ultimately be made to account for their transgressions, makes sense only if there is someone who sees and knows all and who is able to reward and punish according to our deeds. Otherwise, the wicked do indeed prosper, at least insofar as they evade the justice that our limited and quite imperfect human systems can provide. Jesus reassures the Apostles that the injustices men commit do not go unnoticed or unrequited.

Paul’s Epistle to the Romans helps us understand the need for justice and judgment: because sin entered the world through Adam. It is worth observing that Romans was a source of considerable controversy during the Protestant Reformations, and that the Church’s teaching on justification at the Council of Trent turned upon this passage in particular. The disobedience of our first parents led to the loss of original justice and left their descendants in need of redemption. In Christ, we have not merely the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the reception of grace, so that we might become once more friends of God.

How does God go about the laborious and challenging task of making us his friends once more? *What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light.* Although Jesus shares certain things only with the Twelve, his Gospel is not esoteric knowledge meant only for a few initiates, but a teaching and way of life proclaimed publicly to the ends of the earth. Precisely because everyone will be called to account for his deeds, Jesus not only teaches mankind the difference between good and evil, but also pours out his grace upon us, so that we might pursue the former and avoid the latter.

Lest anyone doubt man's capacity to keep Jesus's teaching, we have the testimony of the saints as witness. When the Apostles went forth after Pentecost to proclaim the Gospel, they indeed faced much opposition, and ultimately gave their lives; yet Christ was at work in them, renewing the inner man and overcoming all obstacles, including fear. The history of the Church is filled with men and women who allowed themselves to be renewed and filled with grace, by renouncing the devil and all his works, doing penance, and setting their minds and hearts upon God and the things of God. They held fast to their Lord amidst all the contradictions and opposition they endured, and he maintained their souls in righteousness. Jeremiah praises this divine protection, for even as he is surrounded by enemies, he sings *the Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph.*

After telling the Twelve not to fear men, Jesus says that they should nevertheless fear someone. Who is *the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna?* Although some exegetes have identified him with Satan, it would be better to say that Satan's malice and destructive power operate only within the bounds that God establishes through his administration of perfect justice. God is the one who judges the living and the dead in accordance with their deeds. God is therefore the one to be feared, but always in light of who he truly is.

Matthew highlights God's providential sovereignty and care over creation, especially over mankind. No sparrow falls to the ground without the Father's knowledge, and he has counted all the hairs of our heads. Once again, Jesus tells us not to fear: *you are worth more than many sparrows.* God cares for us amidst the many dangers of this life, always providing the grace to remain in his friendship in integrity of soul. The problem arises, however, when men forget God's providential care and follow desires that lead them astray, or look to other powers as their saviors. In Jesus's time, the Caesars appropriated the title "savior," insisting upon receiving worship that belonged to the true God alone. Such demands, of course, always carried with them the threat of punishment for noncompliance. When the chief priests and the Pharisees plotted against Jesus, they had in mind the Roman threat against the Jewish people, leading Caiaphas to say that it was expedient for one man to die to save the whole nation. Yet neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities could actually deliver on the promise of salvation.

Jesus counsels us not to fear earthly powers, but to have holy fear of God. Although the notion is perhaps less familiar to the faithful than in former times, it has lost none of its importance for the Christian life.

*The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.* The Old Testament, especially the Psalms and Proverbs, is rich in references to the attitude of awe and reverence that one has before God's infinite majesty, which goes naturally together with the desire to please him, and an awareness of the terrible injustice and consequences of offending him. Thomas Aquinas rightly distinguishes between servile fear of God, which is a fear of punishment, and filial fear, "for it becomes a child to fear offending its father." When Adam hid himself from God in the garden, he did so no longer as conscious of being a beloved son, but as one who, on account of his transgression, saw God as a threat.

Fear is a gift of the Holy Spirit, or a spiritual endowment that renders its recipient docile to the promptings of the Spirit in his life, helping him to grow in holiness and making him fit for heaven. Holy fear reminds us of our creaturely condition, that we are not God, but only men; it restrains us when we might otherwise pursue longings of the heart that are incompatible with the ways of righteousness; it leads us to cry out, in our great need, for divine mercy, for *mercy triumphs over judgment*.

This need for holy fear explains why the Gospel passage ends with a warning: *whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father*. Not only does Jesus reiterate the reality of judgment, but he closely identifies himself with the Father's truth and justice, because he is the faithful witness of men's deeds, both good and ill, before the heavenly throne. In Jesus, God takes on a human face, and we need no longer fear, as Moses did, that we might die if we look upon it. Yet that very gesture makes it all the more essential that we love Jesus, and the unseen Father whom he represents, above all else.

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### ***For Further Reading***

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Secunda Secundae, q. 19*.

Ann Astell, ed., *Saving Fear in Christian Spirituality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

### ***In Short . . .***

- ***Jesus counsels us not to fear earthly powers or look for salvation in them.***
- ***God has providential care for all mankind, especially those who love and serve him.***
- ***Jesus instructs us to have both holy fear and love toward God.***

- *We will all be judged in the end for our deeds, both good and ill.*