

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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3/15/2026

Sermon Title: Fear

Sermon Text: Romans 8:15

Rom. 8:12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

Rom. 8:13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Rom. 8:14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Rom. 8:15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

Main Point: The Spirit of adoption breaks the chains of servile fear, freeing us to relate to God not as a master to be dreaded, but as a Father to be loved.

Outline:

1. Sinful Fear (Servile Fear)
2. Godly Fear (Filial Fear)

Introduction

Among the greatest struggles that I have encountered among Christians is the struggle (which we all experience to one degree or another) against doubt, insecurity, and fear.

And today Paul makes reference to this subject of fear. Specifically the fear of God's judgment. The temptation we have to be fearful people is really strong, but

Paul is even more interested in helping us to know how the gospel takes away fear, and how easily we slip into fear apart from the gospel.

Sometimes fear is appropriate when the danger is real. If you're alone in a parking garage at 3am and you see some shady character following you, fear is right, because it's our body filling us with adrenaline to answer a very real threat.

Now, one problem with fear happens when we fear things that aren't there. Things that we could imagine could possibly be there when they aren't. So we become fearful of the possible rather than of real threats.

Another problem is, we could become fearful of God and his judgment, even though he's told us that we're safe in his son. So there *was* a threat before the gospel – in our case God's judgment – but in Christ he has lifted that threat. There is no condemnation now. There is none who can separate us from his love. And the problem is, we could ignore all of those promises that we've been hearing in Romans and still be fearful of God's judgment as if he's still a master and we're still a slave.

Just because these struggles can happen in our hearts doesn't mean that we're not saved. And it doesn't mean that God hasn't done these things for us. But sometimes there is a gap between what we know and what we feel... between what is objectively true and what we subjectively apprehend and appreciate.

Today's sermon is on fear. And next week's sermon is on the subject of assurance of salvation. And while these things do go together I think it's most helpful for us to separate them.

St. Augustine developed this helpful distinction between two kinds of fear that I'm going to use to structure today's message. The one kind of fear he referred to was Servile fear. This is the fear of a slave for his master, or the fear of a convict for a policeman or a judge. And Augustine pointed out that really servile fear is a form of hatred, because the slave or the convict really wishes that his master didn't exist so that punishment can be avoided.

And what Augustine said is that we all must fear something. There has to be something that's ultimate that we serve. So having no fear isn't an option. But what he said was this: in the gospel we are granted a new and healthy fear. A fear

of God that the Bible commends to us. A healthy fear that all Christians ought to have for God. And that's what Augustine called "filial fear." It's an awe and respect that happens because God has adopted us into his family.

In our passage Paul sets up this dilemma: what is the Spirit really like? Is he a spirit of slavery, which produces servile fear? Or is He a spirit of adoption, which produces filial fear. And filial fear is amazing, because it obliterates the terror of rejection. The person who has a filial fear of God will live to please God, but not because he's afraid, but because he loves God as his Father. Because he's accepted in the beloved now.

And what I want for you today is the same thing Paul wants for us. He does not want us to fall back into living as if we're not God's family now. So our first point is what Paul is steering us away from: Sinful fear. Servile fear. And our second point is what he wants most for us: Godly fear. Filial fear.

1. Sinful Fear (Servile Fear)

The first fear we need to address is the subject of sinful fear. Or as Augustine called it servile fear. The fear of a slave for his master. In verse 15 he says,

"For you did not receive the spirit of slavery, to fall back into fear..." (v. 15a)

So what he says is if we received the spirit of slavery, the inevitable destination is fear.

The whole driving force of the Roman slave system was terror. Slaves were kept in line through fear. And Paul says, if your relationship to God is one of a master and slave instead of father and child, fear will be a defining element of your own life.

Here's the thing: Paul is talking to believers and reminding them of the truth and of the falsehood. He says here, when you became a believer, the spirit you were given was explicitly *not* one of slavery. That transaction never took place. And so if you are a believer and you are still fearful of God and his judgment, that is an intrusion of an old reality and not a result of the new birth. Servile fear is going back, not forward.

So this sinful fear – this servile fear – is the fear of a slave. In Roman law, the slave was defined as a talking tool. They had no legal rights. Because a tool has no rights. And so a slave could never say, “I’m safe here,” because their safety totally hinges on the master’s mood. Slaves were never secure. And they had no rights. Not even in the court of law. Paul says,

“if you still fear God’s judgment but you are a believer, what you need most of all is to be reminded of what God has done for you. You need a firm grasp of the gospel, and you need to actually put it into practice.”

Because look: the fear that Paul is talking about here isn’t just fear in general; it is the fear that we have of God and his judgment that comes from a life that is built around the legalistic mindset. So here’s what happens: in legalism, our hope is in our self. And the more our hope is built upon the edifice of ourselves and what we can do, the more reason we have to fear.

I am not talking here about what we *affirm*, what we believe, what we know... I’m talking about the way we actually end up living in practice. Paul is talking about the fear that comes from falling back into a transactional view of God where your standing with him is determined by your performance and how you’re doing.

There is often a gap between what we believe and our actual experience. I’ve mentioned this before: very few people have ever sat down with me in my office and said, “Pastor, I’m legalistic. I think I can be good enough to merit my own justification.”

But I do know many anxious, worried Christians who are constantly thinking about themselves, thinking about their faith, thinking about their works, measuring their good deeds, obsessing over their fruits, and then wondering why they’re always anxious and worried!

When you think of legalism, you might think of the Pharisees weighing out their little bits of cinnamon to make sure they give the perfect amount. And in the Jewish context, that was definitely an expression of legalism.

But in 2026? Well, it can look like the person who says, “I am enough.” This is a person who keeps measuring how well they’re doing by how they feel about themselves. The person who is living by *whether* they are enough.

That's also legalism, because it's totally built around you, what you are, what you do, how you live, and how you feel. It isn't a gospel attitude, because the gospel *answers* self-focus with Christ focus.

Is it any wonder that the legalism and antinomianism that Paul has been aiming at in this book both lead to a spirit of slavery and a life of fear?

If it all depends on you, then you're in the same boat that Paul was in before he met Christ. What was Paul doing back then? He was counting all of his good works and ceremonies, his circumcision and his sacrifices.

But here's the thing, legalists usually don't know that they're legalists. They don't walk around thinking, "This legalism thing is really working out for me." No of course not. Legalists don't think they're legalists. And that's partly because when we think things depend on us, we don't think of that as earning something. We don't think of it as self-righteousness. It slips right past our defenses because it's so fundamental: we don't think this is legalism; we just think this is the way things work.

We just think, "When I'm doing well, when I'm behaving, when I do things right, things work out for me, and when I'm not performing, things don't work well." We sort of become Job's friends: deep down we know things are good for us because *we've* been good. And if something goes wrong, then we must have done something to deserve it.

Do you ever see someone suffering and secretly think, "If they'd followed the rules they won't be in that position"?

- You find out someone has lung cancer and on the one hand you feel horrible for them. But secretly you also quietly think to yourself, "if only they hadn't smoked." See, when you think that, you're also thinking that you know *why you don't* have lung cancer.
- Or you see a homeless person and think, "if they'd only kept a steady job and didn't do drugs," and again it's pretty easy to move from that to thinking that you are the reason you *do* have a bed to sleep in at night.

All of that is an expression of legalism: things work out for me because I've been good, and if I'm bad, things won't work for me. That's legalism, too. And it's the

sort of thing that's really easy to fall into. And the solution to that is to see every good thing that we or other people enjoy as grace and as a gift. And to view the difficulties others experience with sympathy and love.

There are lots of things we can do that expose our legalism. But you may notice, if you see evidence of legalism in your own life, and you also notice that you still live with fear of God's judgment... that's not a coincidence.

But this is why legalists usually don't know that they're legalists: it's because what we're talking about here goes beyond knowledge and affirmation. What we're talking about is the agony that comes from acknowledging Christ with your mind, but really living by hope in yourself. We acknowledge one way, we live like another. We say "gospel," but in our practice we're all about law. What we can do, and making *that* the basis of our peace.

Hope in yourself is legalism. Legalism gives the sort of peace that you will only allow yourself to experience once you've been good enough, done enough, performed enough, and become the sort of person that you think you should be. And that's peace that's really all about you and what you can do. What a shaky peace!

The problem is, that's not the peace that Paul's been talking about, right!? The whole book has been Paul waving us off from that! So how do we go from acknowledging justification by faith alone... from knowing that legalism is destructive... to actually living like we believe that? How do we bridge that gap between gospel knowledge and gospel lifestyle? Paul's answer is that we live by the spirit of God, find our peace in Christ, and stop making us, our feelings, and our performance the basis of our peace. We need to really accept that Christ really loves us apart from our deeds.

Really, the answer is abandoning our self-confidence and instead living with a godly fear.

2. Godly Fear (Filial Fear)

And that is our second point today: Godly fear. Filial fear.

He says in the second half of today's verse:

“But you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons...” (v. 15b)

Paul says we have a choice: either the spirit of slavery, or the spirit of adoption. Which spirit we live by determines whether we live in the sort of servile slave fear that he was talking about in our last point.

But there is a healthy kind of fear, and it's something we see taught all over Scripture: the fear of God. What is sometimes called “filial fear.” Family fear. The sort of appropriate fear, awe, and respect that belongs to God as our Father. As family. As one who loves us. Peter Martyr Vermigli gives a great definition of this kind of fear. This positive kind of godly fear:

“Filial fear...is that by which people live rightly and flee from wickedness because they long to magnify the glory of God and approve righteousness for its own sake.”

You see, if you are in Christ you are rescued, you are taken in, you are made family, you are adopted. So the fear we have for God is a love fear. It's a love rooted in grace, mercy, trust, and acceptance by our heavenly Father.

Remember what we saw last week with the subject of adoption. Before God is our father, he is just “God.” He's the creator. He's the maker. He's the judge. He's the righteous one. And for sinners like us, that is not amazing news. Because not only are we guilty, but we're at a distance from him, and we are afraid of the consequences of violating his law. That's servile fear. It's the same fear an escaped convict has for a judge or a policeman.

And if we're guided by that, we might outwardly do what God says in some ways, but what motivates us is staying out of trouble. What drives us is that paranoia: what happens to me if I fail? As we saw above, that is servile fear.

But in the gospel, he adopts us, makes us his children, and he becomes our Father. That's why Paul says here, the alternative to the spirit of slavery is the spirit of adoption. Adoption is the antidote to the fear Paul has been taking aim at. Because adoption means nearness, closeness, belonging.

Slavery means threats, bondage, entrapment. The fear Paul is talking about here is the fear of punishment. The fear that you're getting in trouble. But that's not what we have in Christ! Paul is reminding us who we are: we don't have to be afraid. We have no fear of punishment. We're family. Our security isn't based on us, on our performance, on what we do, on how faithful we are, on how loving we are, on how much we give, on how many times we've shared the gospel, on how engaged we are in church, on whether we're a first rate Christian or not... none of it!

People who hinge their happiness on those things will inevitably be afraid, because it all comes down to them. Who wouldn't be afraid of that?

In the gospel, God looks upon us, he knows us completely, he knows our every thought, he knows our every sin, and in spite of those things, (for the sake of his Son) he chooses to regard us with the pure and perfect record of his son. In the gospel, we are free! John Calvin says this:

“The Spirit has not been given to harass us with fear or torment us with anxiety, but rather to allay our disquiet, to bring our minds to a state of tranquility, and to stir us up to call on God with confidence and freedom.”

The relationship of a slave and a master is maintained by fear and threats. That's how a master's relationship to his slave is kept up. But the great Puritan writer William Gurnall says that

“The chains of love are stronger than the chains of fear.”

Here is the question: who or what is the strength of your life? If you keep trying to make it you, if you keep trying to be your own answer to that question, well guess what... you'll never really see your fear of punishment melt away. Not only that but you'll see that you have many *other* areas of your life where you are afraid, paranoid, and anxious. It should come as no surprise that someone who is depending on him or herself for her salvation also thinks they're at the center of every other thing in their life. If God isn't your strength... you're going to have to be. And none of us can bear that responsibility. Alexander MacLaren says it very well:

“Only he who can say, ‘The Lord is the strength of my life’ can say, ‘Of whom shall I be afraid?’”

The answer to servile fear... the answer to slave fear... is what Paul says today. It is for us to place our faith in Christ for the first time, or for the hundred or thousandth time... but it's also for us to grasp and rejoice in the spirit of adoption that we have.

In Paul's context, adoption was incredibly powerful. And a slave could be adopted as a son. There was a whole process in Roman law for that to happen. But once the adoptive father claimed his new son before the magistrate, the magistrate would ask if there were any competing claims for the son. And because he had been freed from his old master, silence followed: no one else claims this son.

And here is what then happened in the Roman system: any debts the adoptee had in their previous life were instantly and legally obliterated. A new person had been created who did not owe those debts.

And I want to say more about this adoption than what I said last week. The "spirit of slavery" that Paul says we didn't receive thrives on the fear of debt...this fear of sin. This fear that the judgment of sin carries with it. But adoption cancels the debt. You cannot fear a creditor who has no legal claim on you.

Because we are family, we are not slaves. Because we are family we call him father, not master. Because he has adopted us, we have all the rights of children. There is no debt held against us. There is no prison time owed. And there's more.

Roman law made it incredibly difficult to disown an adopted son—more difficult, in fact, than disowning a natural son. You see, a natural son could be disinherited; an adopted son was chosen by will and contract. The bond was designed to be permanent. As God's children we can't "fall back" into fear because our status isn't based on biological accident but on divine choice and by legal contract sealed by the Spirit.

Conclusion

There is so much I could say, but I'd like to end on this. In Paul's context, a slave could never call his master "father," because that was a claim to the master's inheritance (*Babylonian Talmud; Berakhot 16b*). But look what Paul does: he says you *can* and you do call him "Abba! Father!" This term Father is a term of intimacy

and deep respect. This is not how a slave speaks to his master. Because you are adopted now, what a huge change from “master” to “father”!

When the Spirit prompts the believer to cry "Father," He is empowering a speech act that is legally impossible for a slave. The very fact that the cry exists in the believer's mouth (“Father!”) is Paul's proof that the spirit of slavery has been cast out. A slave fears to speak; a son cries out.

Here's what all of this means: Paul warns us against falling back. But he almost seems incredulous that we would. A slave is driven by fear and dread. A son or daughter is driven by love. Instead of working for God's favor, we live from God's favor. We are heirs and sons and daughters now.

Fear is obsolete for the Christian, because the threat of being “sold” or “punished” has been removed from us by Jesus Christ, and we are family now.

So my conclusion is Paul's conclusion. To fall back into fear is a form of madness. It's a freed son voluntarily putting on the chains of a slave and taping his mouth shut so that he cannot say “Father.” It is madness because it is a denial of the reality of the cosmic emancipation Jesus achieved for us at the cross.

Believer, be free. In Christ you are free from condemnation. You are free from fear. You are free from punishment. And you are embraced as a son or daughter.

Let's pray.