

A lot of people are living in fear these days. Store owners are afraid their business could fail. Many businesses have. Others have been looted and destroyed. Many are afraid of contracting the virus or passing it to others. Those in nursing homes are afraid of how much longer the loneliness must continue. We did not have such fears as these even six months ago. How quickly our world has turned.

What about us...are we afraid? Three times in our Matthew text Jesus tells His disciples not to be afraid. Once or twice is not enough. Three times He says to fear not. FDR once said, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." But Jesus says the only thing we have to fear is God Himself.

Afraid of God, us? No, not afraid of Him. We are to fear Him. There is a great difference. Does a little child fear his daddy? He loves his daddy. He trusts his daddy. But is he afraid of his daddy? No, not when father and son have a loving bond between them, and a bond of trust. Yet, he does fear his daddy, meaning that he is in awe of him. He has such awe for his daddy that he does not, in any way, want to disappoint him.

One episode of the Andy Griffith show has Opie running away from home. He runs away, however, not because he is afraid of his father, or is angry at him. He leaves because he feels as if his poor grades in school will cause his dad to be extremely disappointed in him.

*"Do not fear those,"* says Jesus, *"who kill the body..."* Do not be afraid of them. Do not be afraid of the virus, or of losing your property. Do not be afraid of anything or anyone that can only hurt you or even kill you. Jesus' words here in the Greek mean, *"Do not now, or ever, be afraid of them."* Instead, He says, *"Fear Him (namely God) who can destroy both soul and body in hell."*

Now, this does sound a little fearful. Jesus does not merely say, "Fear God," but God *"who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* Whoa! But let's not miss His point here. He is giving us great comfort. Yes, God can destroy both soul and body in hell. He has this power and authority. But only He has it. No one else, and nothing else does. Nothing in life, nothing in this world, even though it can hurt us terribly, and even kill us, does not in any way have the authority to destroy both our soul and body in hell.

This is why nothing can truly make us afraid. This is why Christians have always been able to face persecution and martyrdom without flinching. They could suffer greatly at the hands of their persecutors, but their persecutors could not, in any way, destroy both their soul and body in hell.

So, fear God, and nothing else. But why shouldn't we be afraid of God, since He can, without a doubt, send us to hell? Here's why, says Jesus: *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows."*

When a baby is born, mom and dad create a baby book. In it they place pictures and mementos. They may put hair in it from their child's first haircut. This baby book is a treasure, and mom and dad safeguard it always.

Your Heavenly Father has a baby book of you. It's in His heart because you are His treasure. You and I couldn't care less if a sparrow over in Timbuktu falls to the ground and dies. But your Father cares. He made the sparrow and He takes care of it. And when it dies, He knows it. Yet, He does not treasure the sparrows as He treasures you. His beloved Son did not die for the sparrows; He suffered and died on the cross for you. He purchased you for Himself, not the sparrows, with the precious blood of Christ. And He brought, not the sparrows, but you into His own family in Holy Baptism.

Jesus says that you are of much more value than many sparrows. Your value is determined by what it cost your Heavenly Father to redeem you from sin, death, and the devil. The blood of Jesus. This is the cost. This is your value to God. You are of infinite value.

Think of it, says Jesus, your Heavenly Father has numbered all the hairs on your head. Who would ever want to know that? Who would even care? Your Heavenly Father, because He cares so much for you.

So yes, He can send both soul and body to hell. But do not be afraid of Him for this reason. An earthly father has the strength to hurt and kill his child. But he won't. Not if he loves his child. And your Heavenly Father loves you. So why ever be afraid of the power He has over you?

Do not be afraid of Him, rather, "*Fear Him.*" Trusting Him as you do, and loving Him, you are in awe of Him. So much so that you never want to disappoint Him. You do not want to fail Him with "bad grades." You do not want to disobey Him and sin against Him. You want to be the obedient child He has called you to be in your baptism.

Yet, we do fail God daily. Not that we want to, but we are weak sinners. Opie did not want bad grades in school, He was just unable to get a perfect report card, and so he ran away from his father. I think there are people who stay away from their Father's house because they know they have disappointed their Father in heaven. They do not want to hear a lecture. They feel guilty. When Opie's dad, after searching, found his son, he lovingly told him that his grades could never affect how he felt about him; that he loved him and always would because he was his son.

This is the message your Heavenly Father wants you to treasure. He could not love you any more than He already does. And your report card? He forgives you for your failing marks. All of you He forgives. All your sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ your Savior. No wonder we fear God with such awe, respect, and trust. Our Heavenly Father truly does love us and always will. Amen.