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GETTING AFTER THE PUCK Romans 8:14-15

Not long ago Laurie and I were trying to make a little headway on trying to make our garage look a little less like we were on our way to being hoarder wannabes. The northeast corner of the the garage confronted me with the need to face some painful realities. There was a sizable box there containing hockey pants, shoulder pads, elbow pads, shin pads, gloves and helmets, along with several hockey sticks and old jerseys. The painful reality is my hockey playing days are over. They have been over for several years, but I have just had a hard time divesting myself of my hockey gear. It is so final, an admission that I'm too old to keep playing. Once the gear is gone, all hope of ever playing again is now undeniably lost. Man, it was hard, but with the counseling and support of a loving wife I finally let go.

It's kind of silly that I had such a hard time with that, because while I enjoyed playing hockey, I was terrible as a player. I can remember quite clearly being out on the rink watching fellow players dash into the corner with reckless abandon to retrieve a puck. I typically didn't go after the puck with such recklessness for one reason. I was too timid. I was afraid I would not be able to beat the other guy to the puck and I would end up out of position, putting my team in a bad spot. Unless I was absolutely certain I could get the puck, I usually would opt for just maintaining my position between the other team's player and our goal so I had some hope of stopping him from walking in on our goalie. In short, I was afraid because I didn't think I was good enough, and my fear actually made me a worse player because my team needed me to go in and get that puck. I would never be a positive force for my team as long as I was afraid. It turns out that in this one thing life is similar to hockey. Fear also keeps us from being a positive force in this world. Let's look at one passage from the Bible that addresses the problem of fear. It's Romans 8:14-15.

FEAR IS PART OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Key here is verse 15. "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again." I like the older NIV translation of the verse, which read, "you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear." I think that is closer to the intent of the verse.

Paul was writing to people who had come to faith in Christ and whose lives had been dramatically altered by that fact. When they put their faith in Jesus they received his Spirit in them. The Spirit of Christ changes people. One way he changes us is that he sets us free. Free from what? From slavery to fear. From its dominating and controlling us. He does not make us a slave again to fear. The word “again” is important. We can only be slaves *again* to fear if we have previously been slaves to fear. Paul was telling us that this is true of all of us. We lived as slaves to fear.

Paul was speaking theologically here. Before coming to Christ everyone lives under a system of law. That system says there is a standard, a law, you must keep, and if you fail to meet the standard there will be terrible consequences. Throughout history people have had all kinds of different laws or standards, but all have some kind of standard or law. Everyone senses they have to measure up somehow.

Unfortunately we don’t measure up. No one lives up to whatever law they have in their minds. Thus we all live with a background sense of failing to meet the required standard. This produces a fear of what the consequence of that will be. Paul had in mind specifically the Law of Moses, which is the one he could not live up to, but this is a principle that is true of all humans.

In his commentary on Romans scholar and Wheaton professor Douglas Moo said the fear Paul wrote about is “that anxiety and fear of judgment suffered...in the pre-Christian state...an inner sense of dread before God.” This awareness of our failing and dread before God is in the background for us all the time. This results in fear of what is going to happen to us. It causes us to fear that others will see the truth about us. Researchers have discovered that it is nearly universally true that in moments of quiet, when we don’t have anything to distract us or to focus our thoughts tend toward a sense of unease, disquiet, a sense of failure and disappointment. In the mix of that milieu there is an element of fear. As Dr. Moo said, it is a vague sense of dread that is always there in the background and it impacts all of our thoughts.

With that background of fear present in all of us it is not surprising that fear tends to be pervasive in humans. Not just the theological fear Paul referred to, but a much broader panoply of fears. There have been many surveys about things people in our country fear. Some of the most common ones are getting on an airplane, even though we know it is safer than driving, and going to the dentist. Oh man, can

I relate to that one. I don't know exactly what it is I fear, I suppose it is pain, but I don't even like to think about going to the dentist.

Other common fears are heights, scary spaces such as elevators, bridges, crowded sporting events, and, surprisingly, malls. My wife most definitely does not suffer from fear of malls. In fact, they are her happy place. Spiders make the list of things we fear for a large number of us. This is definitely on my wife's list. The most pervasive fear is fear of what people will think of me. This fear controls much of how we act, what we say and even how we think. It creates entire industries. The fashion industry for instance is entirely based on this fear.

Fear is widespread in our society. The large majority of Americans when surveyed say that they expect some cataclysm to occur within the next 20 years. They think it will be a nuclear war, an asteroid hitting the earth, an environmental disaster, an epidemic of some virus of massive proportions, or some other similar disaster. Even more to the point, people seem to be fearful of so very many things. Sociologist Barry Glassner wrote a book titled *The Culture of Fear*, in which he said our society is driven by fear.

Dr. Marc Siegel, nationally known health commentator, wrote a book titled *False Alarm: The Truth About The Epidemic Of Fear*. In it he said that life in the developed world today is safer, easier and healthier than for any other people in history, and yet people live in fear. They are susceptible to all kinds of health scares about foods they eat, threats to their safety or to their children or of all manner of diseases.

Dr. Siegel cites the example of one of his patients. This man was a highly educated professor of mathematics. There was a time when Lyme disease became the diagnosis du jour, that he was certain he had Lyme disease. That condition was getting a tremendous amount of publicity and every odd symptom he had convinced him he had the disease. Siegel says he told him, "Lyme disease comes from the bite of a deer tick. You live in Los Angeles. There are no deer in LA. None. Thus no deer ticks. You do not have Lyme disease." But the man insisted he could "just feel it." This patient moved away. Ten years later the PR storm over Lyme disease had died out and it moved into the background. The same patient was no longer concerned about Lyme disease. This, even though he was now living in Connecticut. The name Lyme came from the fact that the condition was first identified in the town of Lyme, Connecticut! There are tons of deer and deer ticks there, and lots of Lyme disease too. But this guy had moved on to fear other

threats. Much of the blame for this atmosphere of fear can be laid at the feet of media and government.

If you are old enough do you remember the panic over Y2K? People were freaking out, certain that the arrival of the year 2000 was going to throw our entire society into chaos and barbarism. Do you remember the terrifying SARS epidemic about 15 years ago? People were so fearful of this dreaded virus. They were going to get it and it would kill them in short order. Do you know what the truth was about that epidemic? World wide there was a grand total of 7000 cases. The worldwide odds of getting SARS was literally 1 in a million. In the United States there was the terrifying sum of 100 cases. The odds of getting SARS in the US was 1 in 3 million! In the US the disease resulted in exactly zero fatalities! Your chance of dying from it in the US was exactly zero.

It would be great if Christians were exempt from the panic and fear so common in our world, but we are not. In fact, we can be some of the worst. Daniel Dreisbach, professor of Law at American University, is an expert on Thomas Jefferson. He says that when Jefferson campaigned for President many Christians spread fear over what would happen if he got into power. When he was elected many women in New England were observed burying Bibles in the gardens or hiding them in wells because they were sure that the Scriptures were going to be confiscated and burned by the new administration!

There are some genuinely fearful things that we will encounter in this world. Some in our church are facing truly fearful things. But this general spirit of fear that exists in our culture is rather surprising. Maybe today people are more enslaved by fear than ever. It is hard for most of us to grasp that this epidemic of fear actually has a spiritual root. It certainly metastasizes into all kinds of forms, but it all starts with that fear, that dread of God because we don't measure up. I don't really have to tell you about this, because you already know. You feel it. Oh, we are not all owned by fear, timid, cowering and helpless. But all of us are affected by our fears every day. They keep us from fulfilling our potential, from venturing out of the comfort zone, from caring for others courageously. They truly cage us. What are you afraid of? What would you do, and what would you be like if you were not afraid? I feel safe in saying that most of us would like to be less fearful, and we know we would be very different if we were not afraid of so many things.

FEAR CAN BE SERIOUSLY DAMAGING

To be a slave to anything is a negative. So when we see that we can be a slave to fear we should take that as a bad thing. Indeed it is. We can see the effects of fear even in our physical bodies. David Ropeik is an international consultant on risk. He used to work for the Harvard Center For Risk Analysis. In a recent report for the National Center For Biotechnology Information he wrote, “the hazards of risk misperception may be more significant than any of the individual risks about which we fret.” In other words, our fear is a greater threat to our health than whatever it is we might fear. Our fears themselves create a new risk to our health and well being.

A University of Minnesota study on fear concluded that it causes, “fatigue, chronic depression, accelerated aging and premature death.” Fear triggers physical events in our bodies. It causes our endocrine system to dump adrenaline and cortisol into our system. This is ideal in a fight or flight situation. It pumps up our blood pressure, increases our heart rate, actually causes our brains to work faster so that we can handle the crisis more effectively.

However, fear over time is what we know as anxiety or stress. They also cause the adrenaline and cortisol to be dumped into our system, but when they remain there over time they become negative. They suppress our immune system making us more susceptible to infection, they increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, cause back pain and digestive tract problems, speed the aging process, increase the risk of cancer and cause greater belly fat. So there you have it. A steady diet of fear will make you sick, fat and old. Then you die.

Those physical effects should clue us in to the fact that fear also has profound emotional and spiritual impact on us. In Acts 16 and 17 Paul and his colleagues boldly and courageously proclaim Jesus in Europe for the first time. But everywhere he goes opposition arises and eventually a riot occurs. He is threatened and usually has to leave town to avoid being killed. In Acts 18 he gets to Corinth. He begins to preach about Jesus and people start believing in him. But once again the opposition crops up. An unusual thing happened next. God gave Paul a vision and spoke to him. He did that because all the opposition was getting to Paul. I think he feared there would be another riot, more believers beaten, and more threats to his life. I think he was feeling like maybe he ought to just skip all that and move on to the next town. But in verses 9-10 we see that God said to him, “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you.” God didn’t need to tell him to not be afraid and to not be silent unless he was afraid and was thinking maybe he ought to just be quiet and get out of town. Paul was one of the boldest followers of Jesus in history, but even he

could be affected by fear. And fear was pushing him to bail out on the mission God had given him. After God reassured him, he stuck it out and stayed in Corinth for 18 months.

The point here is that fear can create some real spiritual problems for us. It can cause us to stop trusting God and to bail out on obeying him. It can keep us from doing what we know God has instructed us to do. Paul was not alone. There is a hero of the faith who provides an infamous example of what fear can do to us. Do you remember what Peter did hours after insisting he would never fail Jesus? After Jesus was arrested Peter was identified 3 times as a follower of Jesus. Every time he vehemently denied knowing anything about the man. Why did he do that? Because he was afraid of what would happen to him. He thought he would be arrested, tried and maybe even executed. So he bailed out on Jesus in a shameful way. It was the most disgraceful and humiliating moment of his life.

It's amazing what fear does to us. One small but sometimes annoying form of fear is stage fright. Laurie has a recital every year in which her students perform their piano or vocal pieces that they have mastered. The audience is not large, usually around 40 people at most. But she has to prepare the students for what happens when they get in front of people. Fear gets involved, the adrenaline pumps, and weird things happen. Suddenly they can't seem to think clearly and they forget what they have learned. She's had students who had piano pieces down cold, they could do them in their sleep. But sit at that piano in front of that little crowd and suddenly they have no idea what they are supposed to do. She had one who was going to sing, and the poor girl took the mic, opened her mouth, nothing came out, and she just dropped the mic and ran out of the building.

It's not just performing. With few exceptions nearly every Christian I have ever known has had moments in their lives when they knew they should have said something to someone, maybe told someone about Jesus, and they didn't do it because they were afraid. Instead of trusting God, living for his glory and obeying him, we become obsessed with just trying to not get hurt. We manage life the best we can rather than follow God's will.

GOD DOES NOT WANT US TO BE SLAVES TO FEAR

Not all fear is bad for us. We have to teach our kids to be wary of running into the street or in a parking lot. But our problem is we have fears that are unnecessary. We fear when there is nothing to fear. The fear distorts our lives, our priorities, our relationships. It causes us to focus on protecting ourselves rather than on obeying

God and loving people. God does not want this for us. So one of the most common commands from God in the Bible is “do not fear.” It appears in one form or another over 250 times. When Joshua was faced with the daunting task of leading Israel the Lord commanded him in Joshua 1:9, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

God wants us to be fully alive. He wants our lives to be adventures, not examples of utter boredom and routine. But do you know what the definition of an adventure is according to the dictionary? It is, “An undertaking or enterprise of a hazardous nature.” An adventure by definition involves risk. But if we are afraid, we avoid risk because we might get hurt. In eliminating the risk, we eliminate the adventure of following Jesus into places where we are in over our heads and must watch him do amazing things to save us.

Anna sent us a picture of her with Ella. They were at Disneyland, and little Ella was riding with Mama on her very first roller coaster. She had an expression of pure glee on her face. For a kid her age a roller coaster is typically scary and intimidating. There’s risk. But Ella was on an adventure, and was loving it. That’s what God calls us to, a life that is full of risk, a little scary, a wild ride, but what an adventure!

In 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 Paul said, “Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith; be courageous, be strong. Do everything in love.” Being on your guard sounds like we need to be afraid and take care of ourselves. But then Paul says “be courageous.” Be bold. Finally he says do everything in love. You simply cannot focus on loving someone else if you’re afraid and are primarily trying to take care of yourself and not get hurt. In his book, *Wild Goose Chase*, Mark Batterson wrote, “If you would describe your relationship with God as anything less than adventurous, then maybe you think you’re following the Spirit but have actually settled for something less.”

APPLICATION

LISTEN TO THE RIGHT VOICE

In 2 Timothy 1:7 Paul wrote to Timothy that the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid.” I like the NASB translation, “God has not given us a spirit of timidity.” Paul wrote that because Timothy struggled with being timid. In other words, he struggled with being afraid and intimidated. Paul wanted him to understand that fear did not come from God.

Well if it didn't come from God, where did it come from? Ah hah, now we see what's going on here. God wants us to be strong, bold, courageous, adventurous so we can be fully alive. When we are fully alive we glorify him all the more. The enemy wants the opposite of what God wants. He wants us to cower in fear, to be weak and intimidated and avoid any and all risks. He wants us to be afraid, to play it safe. Never, ever go into the corner after that puck, because if you do you might go on the offensive and inflict damage on his cause.

So he will be planting thoughts in your mind at all times that you need to be afraid of so many things. You should be on the edge of panic at all times because you are surrounded by terrible threats. Be afraid of what is going to happen in the future, of running out of money, of making the wrong decision, of that terrible disease, of the food you eat, even of God rejecting you.

We need to understand that is not the voice of God. He is telling you to be bold and live the adventure. He is telling you not to be afraid. It is the enemy who wants to play on your fears. Who is the one running the world system? It is Satan. That means the messages he sends you through the world system are inevitably going to work on your fears. It's funny that you'll hear a lot from some preachers that Christians need to not watch the entertainment media and listen to its terrible messages, but they fail to notice that the news is also being used by the enemy. If you want to be less fearful, pay less attention to all the awful news that is bombarding you.

RECOGNIZE YOUR FEARS

Oddly we are not always aware of our own fears. Sometimes we are not even consciously aware of what we fear and how it is affecting us. A number of years ago Laurie and I were on a small twin engine turboprop plane that was flying from the island of Oahu to Maui. This was a 40 minute flight that was a long 40 minutes. That little plane was bouncing all over the sky in some significant turbulence. It kept doing those stomach churning drops that felt like it had stopped flying and was heading toward earth in a hurry. Everyone in the plane was looking scared and there were lots of gasps and cries at the more sudden events. I was tense. Laurie and I found we were both sweating. We were afraid. I needed to stop, identify my fear and ask myself if there was anything to be afraid of. The answer would have been no. I know that turbulence is the aviation equivalent of a bumpy road and it is no threat to the airplane. If I remember that, the fear pretty much goes away.

Often if we can just recognize that we are, in fact, afraid, and we can identify the fear, we will see that it is not necessary. The fear may not disappear, but just understanding it can stop it from dominating us.

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

It is crucial for us to remember the message of this verse. God has given you the spirit of sonship. In other words, he has put in you a spirit that confirms that you are in fact a child of God. This is crucial for a couple of reasons. First, one of the fears that controls most of us is the fear of how we might look and what other people might think of us. The truth is you are a child of God. Who cares what people might think of you?

I watch little Ella, our granddaughter and at times am amazed by her freedom and boldness. She is usually willing to talk to just about anyone, and she will do just about anything with no fear of what people might think of her. Why is that? It is because she is totally secure in the fact that her mama and Dadda love her. Everyone in her life loves her, not just her parents, but her grandparents, her great grandmother, her sister, even her dogs. That makes her so secure that she doesn't spend any time fearing what people might think of her.

The second way our identity helps us with fear is that it reminds us we are children of God. Kids tend to not be afraid when mom and dad are with them. They feel safe. Well Dad is always with us. He is always working for our good. So we don't need to be ruled by fear, for the Father is always with us. 1 John 4:18 says, "there is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." There is no fear in love. If we are certain God loves us, at the core of our being there will be peace, and there will be confidence that our loving Father is looking out for us.

SUBMIT TO GOD

Finally, a lot of our fear comes from our desperate desire to control life and make it turn out the way we want it to go. We can find great freedom from fear when we finally decide that we do not control creation nor should we. We find freedom from fear when we just let God be God. 1 Peter 5:6-7 says, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." Submit yourself to God and let him run the world, so just trust that he cares for you.

There is an odd incident in Joshua 5. Israel was about to launch its invasion of Canaan. Joshua, as their leader, was under tremendous pressure. Israel had already failed at this venture once before under Moses. The odds, from a purely human perspective were stacked against them. No doubt Joshua had some moments when he wondered if he was crazy to attempt this. Shortly before the first major battle at the city of Jericho Joshua ran into a man who stood in his path with a sword drawn. This was apparently a very intimidating individual. Joshua didn't know what to make of him. So he asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

Before we look at the answer, notice who this person is. Verse 14 says he was "commander of the army of the Lord." At the end of the passage this man told Joshua to take off his sandals because he was on holy ground. It was holy because he was in the presence of the commander of the army of the Lord. I believe this was actually Christ. The presence of an angel does not make ground holy. What makes a place holy is the presence of God, and that's who I think this was. Joshua figure it out too, as he fell before this person in reverence. But first Joshua asked this awesome person in verse 13, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

The answer is kind of strange. He answers, "Neither, but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Why would he say neither? These are God's chosen people. He had promised he would be with them. He said he would fight their battles for them. So why didn't he say, "Don't worry about anything, Joshua, because I'm on your side"? He was making the point that God was not on Joshua's side, but Joshua and his people were on God's side. God wasn't there to make sure Joshua got whatever he wanted. He wasn't there to follow his orders. It was the other way around. Joshua was there to pursue whatever God wanted. He was to follow God's orders. God was there, and he would fight to defeat Israel's enemies. But it wasn't because he liked them more than other people, because they deserved more than other people and God wanted to make sure they got whatever they wanted. God was there as their Lord, and they were to serve him. Joshua and all Israel needed to remember that God was with them and would give them success, but not merely because they deserved it. Rather they would win because they were doing God's will and serving him.

This was a crucial point for Joshua to get, and it is equally crucial for us. God is not with us to serve our whims and desires. We live to serve God. The freeing thing about this is that God will not be defeated. If we live primarily for our own purposes we will ever be in fear, for there is at every moment genuine threat that our purposes will be defeated. But are you concerned that God is going to be

defeated? Do you fear he is going to lose? God is not going to lose. So as long as we keep primary in our hearts that we serve him and are living for his will and his purposes, then we do not need to be afraid. We cannot lose, for he will never lose.

