

Standing Up For God

by Staff

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Why do we, in our human nature, not want to stand up against a crowd? Let's face it, we all want to be accepted by our families, friends, our peers or whatever social group with which we may find ourselves involved. We want the affection, respect and approval of others at home, church, school or workplace. No one desires to be embarrassed, ridiculed or humiliated for being different.

In short, no one wants to be isolated.

In the two millennia since Christ, human nature has not changed. People have the same fears today as they had in the first century AD, especially when it comes to facing those in civil or religious authority. It is not easy to be of a contrary opinion when it cuts across the grain of established authorities. We have a natural fear of intimidation and persecution.

During Christ's ministry on earth, people feared to speak openly among the religious rulers of the day because those in authority, namely the Pharisees and Sadducees, had threatened retaliation. "There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews . . . [who] came to Jesus by night," obviously to conceal his acknowledgment of Jesus as "a teacher come from God" (John 3:1-2).

Similar examples dot the book of John: "However, no one spoke openly of Him for fear of the Jews" (John 7:13). "His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue" (John 9:22). In this situation, Jesus had healed a young man, blind from birth, on the Sabbath. When the Jews investigated, the parents verified that the young man was their son and had been blind from birth, but they deferred more incriminating questions to their son, making him take the punishment the Jews later inflicted (verse 34).

Considering this time of the year, perhaps the most poignant example is of Peter three times denying his affiliation as a disciple of Christ out of fear of exposure (John 18:15-17, 25-27).

Fear and Love

True Christianity takes courage. John shows clearly it was not easy for those people to buck the crowd. It is not any easier today. Still, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Less than two months before, the same Peter who said these words had denied His Savior three times. This same Peter had just a few days before preached fearlessly before crowds on Pentecost. What happened to change him?

On that same Pentecost, Peter had received the Holy Spirit. Paul writes of it in II Timothy 1:7: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." However, receiving the Holy Spirit does not instantaneously make one courageous and full of love. One has to grow in these qualities by yielding to God and using His Spirit.

John later adds, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love" (I John 4:18). In some ways love and

fear are opposites, enemies. Love's closest companion and ally is confidence. When we are completely confident, we do not fear that we can do what is required of us. Our problem is that we have not perfected love in us, and so, we fear.

Practice Makes Perfect

The only way to meet and overcome our fear is to grow, taking advantage of each day's opportunities to exercise ourselves in small acts of love. Just as a musician, artist, athlete or speaker becomes confident of his skills little by little, so we must grow in love. Practice makes perfect.

Our "practice," however, is aimed toward becoming skilled in living God's way of love. As we practice extending ourselves in love to others, the fear of loss or suffering or rejection begins to lessen. Our confidence in God's truth builds until we become bold!

Christ warns in Revelation 21:8, "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters and all liars will have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." Our Savior includes fear in very bad company. Examining and then applying ourselves to grow and overcome in this area should certainly be high on our list of priorities.

"[T]he righteous are bold as a lion" (Proverbs 28:1). Let your light shine by boldly standing up for God's truth. Because God hears the righteous (Psalm 34:17; John 9:31), you won't be alone!