

God's Surprising Command

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In a book on Christian discipleship, Tom Wright argues that most people's view of the Christian life completely misses the point. In a chapter on "God's surprising command" [slide 1] he says: "The story is told of Moses coming down from the mountain to report back to the children of Israel. 'Good news and bad news,' he says. 'The good news is—we've got them down from forty to ten. The bad news is—adultery is still in.'

When we think of God giving commands to his people," Wright continues, "that's the sort of image we naturally go for, isn't it: of a God who has all sorts of rather arbitrary rules, and wants to give us more and more of them, most of them designed, it seems, to stop us from doing things we might otherwise want to do. . .

But this conception of God is[n't true]" says Wright, "...Do you know what the most frequent command in the Bible turns out to be? What instruction, what order, is given, again and again, by God, by angels, by Jesus, by prophets and apostles? [get feedback] ...The most frequent command in the Bible [is not 'Be good' or 'Don't sin' but rather] 'Don't be afraid.'" [2] (*Following Jesus*, "The God who Raises the Dead", p. 65-66.)

Wright thinks that this command—"Don't be afraid"—this surprising command, is exactly what we need to hear from God. But at the same time, it is a command we find nearly impossible to follow. [3] As he puts it, we live in a world in which we are waiting for things to go horribly wrong, and we live with the constant anxiety of failure.

There was a time in my life when I lived and breathed fear and anxiety. [4] I was 21 and just starting graduate school. My first year of graduate education was something approaching sheer misery—due partly to the extremely challenging and high-pressure work. Maybe for you, school in general is like this. But the worst of my misery was self-inflicted: I battled, for most of that first year, an overwhelming sense of inadequacy. I was sure I was going to be a total failure—just listen to all those really smart people saying all those really smart things in class that I can't even understand! As a result, I hung back, plagued by fears that others would think my ideas were really stupid. I would lay awake at night dreading having to share my ideas in public, sure I was going to be shot down in flames. I would write papers with a knot in my stomach, sure I was going to find out my arguments were humiliatingly full of holes.

When I later confessed this to a colleague, he said he felt the same way in grad school. (Why didn't anyone warn me?) He also told me the official name for my neurosis: 'Imposter Syndrome'. [5] When afflicted with this disease, you are certain that you were accepted (for graduate studies or a team or whatever) by some terrible mistake. It is therefore only a matter of time before everyone realizes that you are in fact completely unqualified to be there. So you slink around trying to stay unnoticed lest you be unmasked as the imposter that you are and summarily dismissed in disgrace.

Here's my point—aren't we all afraid of being “unmasked”—discovered for who we really are, and rejected? Living in fear means believing deep down that if people really knew what we were like, no one in their right mind would love us? We so need affirmation and approval, and we are so sure that no one will give it to us—at least, not if

they knew the truth. This is Wright's point—we're all afraid, and therefore we're all living with Impostor Syndrome.

There's another name for imposter syndrome. It's called the vice of vainglory. [6] Vainglory is the desire to get recognition and approval from other people in a way that's messed up and out of control. It's a desire for others to notice you and like you that ends up causing you to feel anxiety and to do stupid things. Your self-worth hangs on whether you're making the right impression, an impression you'll do almost anything to make. Now the great thing about vainglory is that is an equal opportunity vice—it is a sinful habit afflicting criminals and goody-two-shoes alike. It's a vice that first shows up on the playground around age 4 and sticks around for the rest of your life. Trying to act like you don't have this vice is probably the best confirmation that you do. Almost everyone has it. Do you?

Let's take a little vainglory self-test [7] and see how you score. For every question I ask, rate yourself on a scale of 1-3. 1 is "only rarely or not at all" and 3 is "lots and lots of the time."

VAINGLORY self-test

1. [slide 8] Have you ever exaggerated something you have done or made up something about yourself, in order to impress those listening?
Often *Sometimes* *Not really*
2. [slide 9] Have you ever said something false or bad about another person in order to get your friends think you're funny and entertaining?
Often *Sometimes* *Not really*
3. [slide 10] Have you ever spent time trying to dress in a way that will win the approval of the fashion elite, whoever they are (in your book)?
Often *Sometimes* *Not really*
4. [slide 11] Have you ever felt cheated because you did something really good or outstanding and you did not receive the recognition you thought you deserved?
Often *Sometimes* *Not really*

know God loves us, our fear is gone and life is happy and comfortable. You know, if that were true, everyone would be a Christian. But it's not true. Why not?

It's not true because we're afraid of God, too. On World Youth Day, the late Pope John Paul II [17] told thousands of young people just like you, "Do not be afraid to welcome Christ and accept his power...Do not be afraid of what he may ask of you...Do not be afraid to set out on new paths of total self-giving." New paths of *total self-giving*. Hmmm. Does that sound good to you? Yeah, that's why you're jumping out of your seat right now and yelling, "Sign me up!" instead of looking at me like I'm crazy. Our more likely reaction to is to be sure you know exactly what God will be asking from you before you accept his call to follow. Robert Adams [18] put the point this way,

Why don't I want to hear God if he is telling me to follow [a given] course of action? Quite possibly because I am afraid. Perhaps the course of action is one that would risk offending people whom I fear to offend....[W]hy am I afraid [of that]? Don't I believe that God will bless my obedience if I sincerely try to do his will? Don't I believe that he can bring greater good out of any disasters that befall me? Don't I believe that there is greater happiness to be found in venturing for God than in playing it safe for myself?ⁱ

And the answer is no. I can't bring myself to really believe that. I'm afraid—really deeply afraid—to accept God's love for me. That kind of surrender is not exactly what calms our fears. Total dependence, a love that surrenders all and risks all? Um, let me get back to you on that...

What would it take to be ready to lay down *that* fear? [19] I'm thinking of Mary at the annunciation. The angel shows up, tells her what God wants from her, and she says, "OK." She gives up being what everyone else expects from a good Jewish woman and wife, she gives birth next to a bunch of animals far from home, she has to drop everything and run to Egypt so her child doesn't get slaughtered, she has to watch the world misunderstand, hate, torture, and kill her beloved son. She has to watch him die. That's what God's love asked of her. Real discipleship instead of the life she would have chosen for herself. Would *you* have said "OK"? And the angel has the gall to tell her "Don't be afraid!"

When I went to Christian schools, I was taught that pride was the big sin. If you're not prideful, well, you're in pretty good shape. And I wasn't proud—I mean, look at me in graduate school—I was this insecure wreck who didn't believe anything I did was any good! But here's the thing. This fear we were just talking about—this fear of God and what he wants from us—this fear is a form of pride, too, isn't it? [20] Aren't we afraid of what God wants because we're a little too attached to what *we* want, and to having the life *we'd* hoped for, on our *own* terms? And aren't we more afraid of rejection from other people than we are of damaging our relationship to God? That's not Christian fear—that's sinful fear.

God knows we're trapped in this fear. That's what he gave us grace, rather than waiting for us to get our lives together first. But grace is power, and power isn't meant to just sit there—it's there to be used. Is the grace God's given you just sitting there like an used bicycle in the garage of your heart, [21] or is it something you hop on every day for a workout? Do you leave it sitting in the garage because you're afraid of what people

will think when you show up for school on a *bike*? Do you leave it there because the bike paths lead through neighborhoods you're not comfortable with, or because there really aren't any bike paths to follow? Do you leave it there because you're afraid you'll fall off or it might break down when you need it most? Lots of us, out of fear, say to God, "Thanks for the bicycle; it's just what I always wanted" and then, out of fear, leave it to get rusty and dusty in the garage. Fear holds us back from real love and real discipleship. Although it may take us a lifetime to gradually gather our courage, maybe it's time for us to get on that bike and take it for a ride.

ⁱ Robert Adams, "The Virtue of Faith," *Faith and Philosophy* (1:1, Jan 1984), pp. 9-10.