

Fear and Courage

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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"Be strong and of good courage, do not fear, nor be afraid... for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you, nor forsake you."
(Deut. 31:6).

Fear and courage: we can't think of one without the other, in fact, one definition of courage is fearlessness. Even so, fear and courage are not always mutually exclusive: we can be afraid and still be courageous. More about this in a minute. Meanwhile there are good and useful kinds of fear, but when we get rid of unhealthy fear, then, by definition, we have courage.

What's the difference? Well, *healthy* fear, sometimes called "holy fear," is not so much concern for self as it is concern for *order*, lest what is good and true from the Lord should come to harm. Then again, all fear, whether good or bad, serves a use, just like a headache serves the use of telling you there is something wrong, something needs attention, something needs changing. Still, life is not meant to be full of headaches, and neither is it meant to be full of fear.

Courage and fear also have this in common, that they are both states of the will, NOT of the understanding. We don't think and reason much about whether we will be fearful or courageous; rather we sense these feelings in ourselves and *then* perhaps start thinking about them. Sometimes a rational approach helps, sometimes not. Certainly *knowledge* can help to quell fear and instill courage, but even so courage is not knowledge, neither is fear the lack of knowledge. Courage and fear are both states of the will.

And we know from the Lord's teachings that we have – or at least can have – two wills, one that is from ourselves, from our heredity and our environment in the natural world, and another that is from HIM, from His Word and from the spiritual world. Our own native will, our external will, is subject to *constant* fear, and furthermore it is impossible for us to change that will from within ourselves; ***we are it and it is us***: to change it from within ourselves would be an obvious and impossible contradiction. But the Lord's new will in us, our internal will, is not subject to ordinary fear, and when we feel moved by this will we can be full of courage. Just remember, only the Lord can implant, nourish, cultivate and strengthen this will in us. Our job is simply to train and discipline ourselves to cooperate with Him.

Now this cooperation has many facets, and very often understanding can make the cooperation easier. But the BIG thing, the MAIN thing is ACTION, positive and determined action against what we know to be evil and false, particularly including the effort to shun the evils we find within ourselves as sins against the Lord. This may seem strange, since to "shun" is to flee, or to run away from, which seems like cowardice and fear, but courage is not foolishness, and when we know what we're up against – like an avalanche or a tsunami – we just can't mess around.

As Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians, "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). This is something we understand even more clearly from New Church teachings about the gruesome influence of the hells. The ONLY way we can resist it is with the Lord's help, and we can only benefit from that help when we get our selfish thoughts and our arrogant attitudes out of the way.

In that connection, we know that just one angel, in the power of truth and goodness from the Lord, can resist the onslaught of many thousands of evil spirits. So how can we associate ourselves with angels? One way that might not be obvious at first is to associate ourselves with other people in this world who love the Lord and keep His commandments. After all, these are the angels we can see and hear. We may not share the same views on everything but we can take courage and inspiration from their commitment, and strength from their support. This is one reason we worship and also learn and discuss the teachings of the Word *together* in the church: without the mutual support and encouragement that comes from this affiliation, the force of external things can be so great that it distracts us completely from really turning to the Lord. But with their support we are reminded to persevere, and in their fellowship we can gain practical insights on how to do so.

For example, can we learn to trust the angels that are with us and open ourselves up to them? While we are bogged down in natural things – worried about our reputation, honor and gain – this is hard; but if we don't learn to do it now we are not likely to do it in the next life either – to our eternal detriment. How, then, can we begin?

One way is simply to ask for confidentiality. If you don't ask, what can you expect? (Someone might think it helpful to share your story with others.) Another is to speak only from the heart, in charity. Naturally you may be afraid to share anything personal based on some experience from the past, but if you're clear about your concerns (with someone you respect) you should be able to let down your guard. And you may be surprised at the encouragement you get. So, too, as the Lord said, we must be prepared to go and visit others who are in the prison of worry or DESPAIR and offer *our* support. The Lord is clear that if we don't do it for one of the least of these we won't do it for Him either (Matt. 25:45), *and so He can't do it for us!*

Meanwhile it's good to know that fear and courage are not always mutually exclusive. In other words, we can be afraid and still have courage. In fact those are the times when we most need courage, since what it really comes down to is a battle between our own two wills.

Selfish fear is the opposite of love. It is contractive, inward-looking and defensive; in fact it really springs from hate: when we fear for ourselves we hate: we hate to give something up and we worry because we might have to do so; we hate others in comparison to ourselves; we hate what's happening to us, or what *might* happen; we hate the way we're being treated. But if we can overcome that fear, what takes its place is heavenly love, and that love has courage to do anything! That love is outward-looking, free, generous, unconcerned for the consequences to self except only that the ability to keep giving should not be destroyed. There are records throughout the history of ancient and modern civilization testifying to enormous feats of strength and courage that could only have been accomplished from unselfish love – like the woman who incredibly *lifts a car off of a crash victim trapped underneath it*, or the man who rushes into a burning house to rescue a baby. [If only we could understand that our own spiritual houses are burning when we are consumed by worldly concerns....]

Most fear is backward-looking, most courage is of the present and looks to the future. It *seems* as though fear is forward-looking, since it always anticipates what might be next. But really this anticipation is almost always based on the experiences of the past. Something has gone wrong; we are afraid it will go wrong again. Someone has hurt us; we are afraid he will hurt us again. We have been hungry in the past; we are afraid we will be hungry again. These things simply

are not true, not *necessarily*. They all depend on the circumstances, and every day is a new day. Of course, experience *is* a valuable teacher, but we can't let the experience of the external world dominate over the experience of the spiritual world which, after all, is the source of everything. And the spiritual is not the past, *it is only the present*. What the Lord has *not* done before is NOT impossible today, or tomorrow. Indeed with help and encouragement we know very well that our states can be so changed that new ways open up within us for the Lord to work. And new ways can open up in others, too!

"It is because of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning" (Lam. 3:22-23).

Remember when the 11 brothers all went down into Egypt during the famine in Israel and found Joseph in Pharaoh's court? They were afraid! Why? Of course, they remembered the past, they remembered what they had done to him and they knew how *they* would feel if they were he. But Joseph was not like them; instead he reassured them and pointed out the truth that in all that had happened to him GOD had led and guided him for the benefit of all Israel, so in the end he said,

"'Fear not; for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore do not be afraid; I will nourish you and your little ones.' And he comforted them, and spoke kindly unto them" (Gen. 50:19-21).

Remember, too, how many times the angels at the Lord's advent comforted the leading characters of the story with the words, "Do not be afraid!" The point is, many times in the past angels had been sent on missions of destruction in Israel; also it was plainly taught that no man could see God and live. Based on the past, then, these men and women were filled with fear! But the things that happened at this time were not the past, they were new. And so for us, every day is a new day, particularly when the Lord is born within us.

In any case, our memories aren't ONLY repositories of bad experiences! Countering these negatives everyone on serious reflection can recall *some* real pleasures from the past. "Count your blessings" isn't just an idle proverb: everyone knows how the Lord has helped – even done an outright miracle – at some time in his or her life. Whether it was the miracle of love shared with another, a miracle of birth or healing, a near miss, a miracle of help either given or received just at the right moment, or any other kind of miracle: remember, that was not from you, yourself, that was the Lord working in you, with you, for you. And just as He gave you that one miracle, that one beautiful experience you'll never forget, so He can give you another and another. We ourselves are the only obstacles. Therefore the Lord said,

"Do not fear, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell what you have, and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches, nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:32-34).

Selfish fear arises from the natural mind, love and courage from the spiritual. So fear can close the interior mind, but love, which brings courage, can open it. Most fear also is caused by evil spirits who insinuate themselves into the things of the natural mind and body so that interior

things will be cut off. But courage is inspired by good spirits and angels who are buoyantly, creatively, lovingly alive, full of the powerful healing spirit of the Lord.

Fear takes away freedom and rationality. It binds people in prisons of doubt and fallacy. True, when all else fails the Lord governs through fear, but when He does so it is not of His WILL, which is constantly providing freedom and rationality, it is by His *concession* or *permission* that *allows* us to struggle on our own if we insist.

Still, let's be clear: the teachings of the Word about courage are challenging to apply. Just think of any conflict: when we are in states of fear we are in external, worldly states; we are subject to the influence of evil spirits; we feel negative, defensive, withdrawn, out of touch with others who can help. How can the Lord break into this pathological cycle? How can *we* open up to the presence of angels when our very situation excludes and denies them?

The answer, as is often the case with cures in medicine, usually can be found in the same environment as the problem. So although the outcome of our struggle will be a change in the whole perception of life from what is external to what is internal, the first *means* to that outcome, as mentioned earlier, is simply DOING the right thing outwardly. That's why the Lord gives us such simple instructions in the Word: DO this, and DON'T do that. Get in the habit of acting *as if we really mean it*, so that in time we *can* really mean it.

Of course the Word isn't just about natural life; it is written with an internal, spiritual meaning – a meaning that will only become clear in time. But we have to start somewhere. So if we are willing to receive a conscience from His Word and strength to do what it teaches whether we like it or not, if we just DO IT, then gradually the Lord can work a change also from within so that obligation turns to delight, and fear turns to love and courage. We may dread doing something that we know we ought to do, but if we accept that it must be done the Lord will give us the means in spite of the fear. Then based on the willing commitment represented in that action fear can be overcome, the old will can be set aside, and the fearless love and courage that come from the Lord can take its place.

In the end the whole of the Lord's Word is a testimony of His mercy and providence in history, and His promise of the same for the future. And just as He encouraged people from beginning to end in those stories, so we need to let Him encourage us – in spite of our fears. We can do this now, little by little, if we stay “in the moment.” New fears will not be conquered yesterday, neither is anything ever done tomorrow. But if we are ready they will be conquered today, and not by ourselves, but by Him, with our humble co-operation. Therefore,

“Be strong and of good courage, do not fear, nor be afraid... for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you; He will not leave you, nor forsake you.”

Amen.

Lessons: *Numbers* 16: selections for Sunday School
Children's talk on the fear of the Lord

Deuteronomy 31:1-13 and *Arcana Caelestia* #7280