

Study 4: Fear at work

Bible texts you could consider: Matthew 6:19-34 and 10:26-33.

Key idea:

Fear can destroy our lives and our our faith. Jesus knows this, and will help us overcome our fears when we keep him in the centre of our lives.

1. Have you ever feared someone or something at work? What? What effect did it have on you?
2. How did you deal with it? [depending on the level of sharing and trust in your group, you could ask if people have self-medicated with alcohol or drugs to try to deal with fear or sought professional help.]
3. This may have been covered in 1 above, but what do we fear at work? [embarrassment, personal failure, not succeeding, doing things that harm others (losing money, causing injury or death), missing out, losing our job, losing our way, bullying, harassment, being asked to do something we can't do, being made to work when we don't want to (e.g. late nights, weekends, when we have another commitment), boredom]
4. Do you ever work later than you want/need for fear of being seen to be lazy or less committed?
5. Do you think fear, perhaps only in part, drives our use of smart phones, home computers etc, so we always stay in touch with work, and do not miss that important email etc? Does fear stop us switching off from work?
6. How would you define fear? [An unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain, or harm.]
7. As we are emotional beings, isn't fear just natural? If someone is trying to harm you, isn't it natural/reasonable to be afraid? Is fear just a preservation instinct that is a natural consequence of the fall? [Possible places to go are 'fear came into the world when humans rejected God'. In Genesis 3:8-13, Adam and Eve appear to try to hide. Adam blames Eve. However, even if fear is part of the fallen world, Jesus has some things to say about it.]
8. Have you ever heard a sermon on fear? e.g. on Matthew 6:19-34 and 10:26-33. What do you remember of it? Did it help you?

9. When you are afraid, how do you feel when you are told you should not fear or worry? [It may help some people, but often it doesn't.]
10. [Repeating 2 above] Have you learnt to deal with fear? If so, how? What works? [Try to be specific. What prayers? What patterns of prayer and/or Bible reading? What help from professionals, pastors, friends and mentors? How often?]
11. Do you think it is realistic to never feel fear/worry at work?
12. If there are things that should make us fearful (e.g. making a mistake that hurts other people), how do we understand the command/advice to not fear or be worried?
13. Do you think the command/advice to not fear means we are to have no fear, or we are not to be overwhelmed/shaped/limited by fear? [See notes below, but it does seem that the point of passages like Matthew 6:19-34 and 10:26-33 is that, if we worship only God, and keep him at the centre of our life (e.g. seek his kingdom first), we will not be consumed or consistently distracted by our fears and anxiety.]

Spend some time praying for each other and your fears.

End of Study

Study Notes: Some further reflections

Introductory comments

Fear can be one of the most debilitating and destructive forces at work. It does not affect all workers the same. Many people learn to live with the challenges and disappointments they meet at work in ways that do not unduly detract from their enjoyment of work and life generally. However, for others it is crippling.

Even some apparently very successful people (CEOs, national leaders etc) are overcome by doubts and fear. People talk of being 'paralysed by fear'. They hate being at work, but hate being away from work, lest they not be there to deal with problems that arise.

As mentioned in the essay that form the notes for study 7, in my experience, many senior executives oscillate between hubris and paralysing fear. Both are manifestations of excessive self regard, which is the opposite of love. Hubris and fear take a devastating toll on the people who work around these people, not to mention the people themselves and their families. Yet love, being totally outward looking, is the cure to both. In these circumstances love can take many forms, such as accepting and laughing at one's own mistakes, accepting that others make mistakes, not claiming responsibility for success that is attributable to others, supporting colleagues when they are struggling personally, etc. But we need to help each other identify our fears and overcome them by prayer and practical acts of love.

Fear is a common, but not universal, emotion in the early stages of work ('how do I do this job?', 'what do people think of me?', 'will I ever get on top of this job?', 'what happens if I make a mistake?'). But it can continue throughout our working lives.

I have known successful professionals who do not plan anything for the weekend, or anything on weekday evenings, in case they have to work. Some avoid taking holidays, in case they are not around to manage things, or in case problems arise. For some it is worse. They always want to be around at work to cover-up or hide mistakes (real or perceived).

I do not know if there is technical difference between anxiety and fear. Someone who suffers from the clinical condition of 'anxiety' may be more prone to 'fear in the workplace' than others. However, I know many people who seem quite capable of managing personal relationships, families, leisure, sport, and many other aspects of 'normal life', and yet suffer from fear at work.

Changed circumstances can provoke fear. A takeover of our employer, a restructure, and a 'downsizing' can all affect our sense of stability at work. Fear of being sacked or squeezed out is common. Fear of not being able to get another job affects many, especially some women (due to lingering discrimination) and older people.

Fear manifests itself in many different ways, although it often goes undetected by others. It can result in poor sleep, poor diet, too much or too

little exercise, strained and broken relationships, chronic illness and death (from suicide or lack of care).

Fear can arise from a lack of effective supervision, a blame shifting culture, unreasonable expectations, the nature of some industries, or placing our trust in people who prove to be unreliable or give wrong advice. Sales people cannot effectively control their customers. Medical science is not exact. Doctors can not be sure if they have diagnosed properly or if their patient will respond as expected to a treatment/medicine. New products/shows/presentations can 'bomb'. Predicting the behaviour of others is notoriously difficult. We don't know how government departments, administrative bodies, courts, police etc will behave. Our concepts of rational thought, justice, and 'the right thing to do', may not be shared by others. Much fear comes from being unable to control things beyond oneself. This can be made worse by our sense of our own limitations ('human finitude'). We know we are not perfect, and we make mistakes. Many workplaces and bosses are very unforgiving.

Thinking theologically

No doubt some fear can be attributed to our vanity. We want to appear successful, in control etc., whereas God tells us this is not where our true value lies. We are sinners, but loved and saved sinners.

We are told we will face persecution and suffering in this world (Matthew 16:21, Romans 8:17, 1 Corinthians 12:26, Philippians 1:29 etc). We should expect that to sometimes come at work. However, we are not left to suffer alone.

I think it is likely Jesus did not mean, 'don't think of the consequences', or 'take risks, nothing can go wrong'. He no doubt had in mind that we should remember our true value and our sure hope. We are made in the image of God, and nothing can take that away from us (Romans 8:37-39). We are of inestimable value because Christ died for each one of us. In an ultimate sense we need not fear set-backs and failures in this world, because God still loves us and our futures are as glorious as they are certain. And perhaps it is these thoughts, and others drawn from the Bible, that should crowd out our fears. There may still be a struggle between our dark thoughts and our hopes, but fear need not overwhelm us.

Leisure (see study 3 notes on this) can help. But fear can impinge on leisure. We may be going for a walk or cycle, watching TV or a movie etc, and our mind wanders to the problem(s) we are dealing with at work. Taking a weekend/long weekend/holiday/sabbatical may help, but not if we can't relax and leave our worries at work. For some, it takes many years to be able to 'switch off' from work.

One thing that may help is to think how Christian virtues can help e.g. hope and love. Can our sense of the hopes we have in Jesus dull the impact of our fears, or replace them? Can focussing on the love that Jesus, our family and close friends, have for us reshape the value we see in ourselves, so the things we fear seem smaller?

There are some disciplines that can help us manage fear. No doubt our fears can crowd out our prayers, but our prayers have two significant ways of helping us. First, when we pray, we get help from the most powerful and effective person in the universe. Things that seem insurmountable to us are small to him. Second, the act of praying itself can crowd out our fears. I find that when I pray about something, I can move on. I've done the best thing I can do to deal with a problem.

We need short, memorable prayers to help us deal with fear. I pray at least at the beginning and end of each day. I have found these helpful:

1. Loving Father, you know what is on my mind and what lies ahead of me today. I can't see a way through. Please help me stay calm, work effectively, and be gracious. Please help me with each step I take today. Amen.
2. Dear Father, please help me through the next hour. Amen.
3. Heavenly Father, you know I am worried about x [name it]. It seems beyond me. Please could you look after it while I sleep. I will take it back up in the morning. Amen.

Being a lawyer is an odd job. You spend most of your time thinking about things that could go wrong. The more complicated and innovative the work you do, the more things that can go wrong. I lived with a level of fear for 27 years. It was worse in the early years, both because I was inexperienced and because I was not a Christian. Even though my responsibilities increased

substantially in the later years, often 'signing-off' on deals worth many billions of dollars, I was never again paralysed by fear. This is because I learned to (mostly) leave work at work, and because I often prayed regularly through the day. I started the day reading the Bible and praying, and that set me up for the day. I knew I would face challenges through the day, but I knew Jesus would be with me.

We can also share our fears with each other. Sometimes we fear the consequences our actions, or other circumstances, will have on people we love, and bottle up those fears. When we talk about our fears, they can lose their potency. After I had been a partner for a few years, just bought a family sized house (with Sydney sized mortgage) and my wife was pregnant, I got a phone call. It was just before Christmas. I was told one of my partners had lost or stolen about \$30 million. As I would be liable for that loss, I faced personal bankruptcy, and the loss of my house and income. It was not the happiest of Christmases, as I worried about the impact on my wife, child and other dependents. My initial thought was to keep it to myself, and see how things worked out. However, the weight of these problems was eventually too much, and I confided my fears to my wife. Her reaction was that she never expected to be well off, and 'The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.' A wave of relief washed over me. We prayed. I relaxed. Life moved on.³⁶

Biblical material

It is helpful to do a word search of 'afraid', 'fear', and 'worry', particularly in the New Testament. Often the reason to not be afraid is because Jesus is present.

In Matthew 14:27 the disciples are afraid because they think they see a ghost (which would make most of us afraid!). Perhaps their fear dissipated because they realised they saw their friend Jesus, rather than a ghost. They could take heart and put their fear aside because Jesus was with them.

Again, the disciples were afraid when they thought they would be destroyed at sea (Mark 4:40). Their fear dissipated when Jesus acted in power to

³⁶ I ended up losing a lot of money, but I did not go broke.

quieten the storm. Jesus can do that for us when we call on him for help. If Jesus can calm a storm, he can calm a bully, or help us with our work.

We read the disciples were afraid when the resurrected Jesus appeared to them (Mark 14:8). Who would not be? Yet, when they realised what Jesus had done, their fear subsided and they went on to do the most astonishing work, because the Spirit was with them (see the Book of Acts).

The references to fear above are to specific situations. Matthew 10:26-33 is about more general fear. Verse 26 can be paraphrased as, 'Do not fear things you do not understand, because all will be revealed'. Verse 28 says, 'do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell'. Much has been written on this enigmatic passage. Some think we should fear Satan, the great deceiver. But we know he was defeated on the cross. So it seems more likely we should fear our mighty and awesome judge. We need not read this to mean that people are obliterated in hell. Rather, we should fear the final judgement we all face. God feeds the sparrows and knows the number of hairs on our head. And because he knows us, we have nothing to fear in an ultimate sense. The only thing we need fear are the consequences of rejecting God.

Hence, in our work, we should be careful to not ignore God, or let work take over our lives. We can be concerned about making mistakes, but letting go of God is the only thing we should really fear.

It would be simplistic to say, 'God says, "don't be afraid", therefore we should not be afraid'. I have heard some preachers say this, and I have wondered if they have thought enough on the subject. We are complicated, emotional beings. We understand cause and effect. A more comprehensive response is required. May I suggest the following:

1. Admit fear to yourself.
2. Discuss it with good Christian friends, and ask for their prayers for you (both the circumstances that cause you fear and your emotional response to that cause).
3. See if sin is involved, and, if it is, repent of that sin and seek God's help to avoid that sin in the future. The most obvious sin is vanity: 'I am afraid to fail because I will not look good'. Yet not all concern for success or reputation is sin. Our concerns for failure may be for the consequences

our failure may have for our parents who supported us through our studies, or the financial impact on our dependents. In many workplaces we need a good reputation to be able to work and work well. So, some balance is required here. Good Christian friends, or your pastor, may be able to help find that balance.

4. Consider if you are worshipping God, or wealth or your reputation, and, if you are worshipping something other than God, try to seek first God's kingship over your life.
5. Consider if there are ways to manage the causes of your fear. (Note how far into the list this comes. So often the our first response is, to try and fix the problem on our own, or to hide a mistake, or to blame someone else. One of the hardest things to learn is to take responsibility for our mistakes.)
6. Pray, and more specifically, invite Jesus to walk with you each day. We saw in the passage from Matthew 14:27 that the reason the disciples could take heart and not be afraid was because Jesus was with them. There is no point leaving Jesus at home in the morning. Take him to work with you.