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FAITH THAT LASTS



A FATHER AND SON ON
CULTIVATING LIFELONG BELIEF



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FEAR PROTECTS

*The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?*

*The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

PSALM 27:1

We want to draw attention to one particular region within the Star Trek universe: the “neutral zone,” a putatively safe space, which all galactic parties are obligated to honor. Of course, as the series unfolds, all kinds of covert operations, diabolical plots, and attempted surprise attacks occur in the neutral zone, reminding us that so-called neutral zones are not so neutral after all.

Sadly, a transcontinental flight is the closest most of us will get to an intergalactic voyage. But all of us crave safe spaces, and in our increasingly volatile cultural moment the idea of a neutral zone is appealing. For many of us the family home comes to mind. After all, this is our haven, the place in which to seek shelter and refuge from the wider world.

The problem comes when we seek a complete separation from the contaminating influences of daily life—a separation that remains practically unworkable. For many well-intentioned Christians who fear the degradation they perceive in our culture, the

home becomes a kind of fortress—a place of isolation, a quarantined zone where bad ideas, images, and influences are held at bay and kept out of the range of infection. For some the protective measures go well beyond the censure of pop culture. If you’ve encountered the strange world of preppers—a contemporary permutation of the survivalism of the atomic age—you’ve likely seen an interior-decorating scheme that has more in common with a bunker than a home.

Of course, we do need to build safe spaces, and the home should be a place where we instruct our kids, protect our families, and nurture our values. But we cannot be naive about how influences penetrate both hearts and homes. Our homes are always porous and permeable, and they inevitably display some culture or other, whether we like it or not. The influence of media has been vastly amplified in recent years and there is simply no way to seal off minds and hearts from exposure to the wider world.

Smartphones may be new, but the challenge of being a faithful witness in a world that’s actively hostile to the gospel is a perennial feature of the Christian life. It’s also a task we’re called to enter into with love, humility, and joy—not fear, paranoia, and suspicion. One of this book’s main contentions is that Christians ought to cultivate discernment in place of fear. We don’t want to be naive about the state of the world around us, but neither do we want to see ourselves as somehow immune to it either. Rather, we want to gain the eternal perspective that helps to make sense of the world as it is and is it will one day be.

THREE HARMFUL BYPRODUCTS OF THE FEAR-PROTECTS MINDSET

Marilynne Robinson has a two-tier thesis about contemporary America: First, it is full of fear. “And second, fear is not a Christian habit of mind.”¹ For all America’s deep divisions, fear

remains a nonpartisan phenomenon, a sad point of unity in our national life. It's not just the nonstop headlines of shootings, police brutality, the immigration crisis, and growing civil unrest. It's that all of these tragic events only spark more division and acrimony in their wake. Mass shootings, for instance, have become a kind of sickening new normal, and every time one of these atrocities is carried out it rehashes a vicious public debate that grows increasingly politicized. In such a context true mourning and reckoning are all but impossible. Both sides of the political aisle are characterized by mutual bad faith, and everyone seems convinced of the pernicious motives of her ideological neighbor. This is the world we send our children into. Little wonder we've grown overprotective.

Though the apostle Peter calls us "resident aliens" because we won't reach our true home until we are face-to-face with our Lord, it's difficult to strike the balance of being "in the world but not of it," and we're often tempted to gravitate toward one of the twin extremes of cultural isolation and assimilation. Ideally, this tension enables us to strike the proper balance: to invest in our world while maintaining an eternal perspective that qualifies all our human endeavors. Successes can be celebrated and failures can be mourned, but neither calcifies into the type of worldliness that keeps us from God's kingdom.

But a crude reading of the "in and not of" tension can also lead to a mindset that we're calling "fear protects." The fear-protects mindset views the world outside the church as so thoroughly compromised that anything more than a modest level of engagement risks contamination. It fosters a highly insular way of life that seeks to build a wholesome counterculture of alternative institutions for the education and nourishment of its members. Though not always a direct byproduct of this line of thinking, fear protects includes everything from homeschooling

and Christian higher education to church camps and youth retreats to the Christianized counterparts to Hollywood movies and alternative music.

Speaking specifically of fear protects, we'd like to explore three harmful habits of mind—namely, dualism, spiritual elitism, and the glamorization of the forbidden.

In the early days after his conversion, Stuart learned firsthand about the pitfalls of dualism. At that time he viewed anything that was not explicitly Christian as either inherently evil or as a real threat to the spiritual life. Most of the books on holiness he was reading defined the Christian life primarily in oppositional terms, pitting the church against the world. This is not entirely unwarranted—after all, Christians ought to resist anything that undermines Christ's authority. Consequently, there's a principled abstemiousness in the lives of Christian men and women, which will strike some as prudishness. But Stuart's resistance went beyond prudence. His worldview began with giving primacy of place to the fall and sin.

Stuart's overestimation of darkness led him to underestimate the goodness of God's creation, the significance of the creation mandate, and the ultimate act of divine affirmation, namely, Christ's incarnation. This imbalance is a mark of immature faith. God's Word doesn't see the world as a spiritual desert marked by the Lord's disapproving absence. Instead, Scripture is filled with imagery extolling the virtues of God's creation. Psalm 19:1 exclaims, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." Proverbs 3:19-20 spells out creation's legibility in terms of wisdom and knowledge:

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens;
by his knowledge the deeps broke open,
and the clouds drop down the dew.

Christians down the ages have celebrated this abundant comprehensibility as God's wisdom. And the natural sciences continue to disclose the creative scope of his wisdom. Offering a poetic summary of the many prophetic celebrations of God's creative wisdom, the apostle Paul declares that in Christ "all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17).

By downplaying the significance of the created order, Stuart had mistakenly given more authority to the devil than was his due and had failed to distinguish legitimate goods from damaged and corrupted ones. He had misunderstood God's gifts in creation and the role of pleasure in experiencing his good provisions. In his zeal Stuart had unconsciously assigned all that seemed to bring physical or cultural pleasure to the domain of darkness. During those early days, he viewed most cultural productions (especially movies and music) as dangerous. Not even literary geniuses were exempt. Early in his relationship with his soon-to-be wife, Stuart expressed stern disapproval at her reading of Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*.

So just how does this mindset lead to dualism? In effect, casting such a withering gaze on the earthly aspects of life largely evicts Christ from its daily precincts. Sociologists and philosophers often spell this out in terms of a sacred-secular divide, but practically it tends to keep Christ in churches and religious gatherings and out of the fine texture of day-to-day living. You leave the service, prayer meeting, conference, or retreat and head back into the "real world." Our spiritual lives are highly prized, while the quotidian obstacle course of dirty diapers, leaking gutters, and check engine lights is seen as mundane chores at best, a profane test of endurance at worst.

We stated in the introduction that many so-called Christian homes mirror the surrounding culture in ways they don't even recognize, and here we find a powerful example. At this juncture we

need to briefly nod in the direction of ancient dualisms to flesh out the modern translation in our homes. Speaking broadly, each of these dualisms regards the physical world as inherently inferior to the spiritual one. From Manichaeism to Gnosticism, the principled condemnation of the created order tends to terminate in one of two extremes: asceticism and hedonism. If you think the world is a thoroughly contaminated realm of darkness that militates against the soul, you may express your contempt through either self-denial or overindulgence. Asceticism expresses its hostility through antagonism: if the world is defiled, I want nothing to do with it. Hedonism expresses its disdain through apathy: if the world (including my physical body) is defiled, nothing I do matters. My soul remains intact as my flesh pursues its degrading hobbies.

Homes shaped by dualism blaze a middle path between the extremes of asceticism and hedonism. For instance, Stuart expressed his contempt for the world through his resistance to the wider culture. He purged his massive record collection, turned his nose up at all “secular entertainment,” and read only Christian literature. However, this kind of asceticism is usually counterbalanced by a principled apathy regarding the created order. This is where we encounter pronounced irresponsibility in everything from diet to environmental concerns. When Cameron moved from Europe to the United States in the late 1990s, for instance, he began to notice an odd imbalance in many of the Christian homes in the Bible Belt South. While there would be a laudable emphasis on understanding Scripture and the Christian worldview, there was consistent neglect in the realms of diet and rest. The assumption wasn’t so much that overindulgence and overwork were beneficial habits as it was that care for one’s body was an expendable part of the Christian life. Pressing into the matter, Cameron was surprised to discover that wholesome eating and regular exercise were often regarded as distractions to one’s devotion. Though this

may seem harmless enough, it can amount to dismissing the body as little more than an inferior part of the physical world, a view utterly foreign to the Christian faith, which turns on the physical resurrection of its Lord and Savior and promises a resurrected body to each of his followers. If, however, the world is viewed as thoroughly compromised, it's easy to forget that all things hold together in Christ. Indeed, it becomes easier and easier to live as though he doesn't exist.

Stuart's aversion to Irving Stone and his old record collection was an unwitting division of the sacred from the secular, the public from the private, and faith from reason. It neatly divided Christianity from the rest of life. In our devotion to Christianity we need to guard against the tendency to elevate it into irrelevance. If Christ dwells exclusively on the mountaintops, he'll play little to no role in our daily lives. For this reason many well-intentioned men and women cultivate homes marked by his absence rather than his active presence. When Cameron and his sister would leave the house to catch the bus for high school, their mom used to tell them, "Remember the Lord!" It sounded hokey to Cameron, but it turned out to be a needed prophetic word because, though he wouldn't have articulated it like this at the time, his tacit assumption was often that God wouldn't deign to show up in a place as spiritually sterile as a public high school. By challenging the lie that the Lord is too holy for daily life, Mary reaffirmed his inescapable presence. We would all do well to go about our daily tasks with the phrase "Remember the Lord!" ringing in our ears.

The dualism that slowly degenerates into a form of unwitting atheism is subtle. Spiritual elitism, on the other hand, is much more in-your-face. If we inculcate the fear-protects mindset in our households, we are liable to foster deep hostility for those we view as threats. In this sense, fear is a recipe for an us-and-them approach to the world. While it's vital to have spaces that provide

shelter and rest from the world, we need to guard against the tendency to allow fear to lead us into spiritual elitism. Consequently, any form of strategic cultural retreat must never fall prey to this us-and-them dynamic. To do so would be more than arrogant; it would be downright naive. Whatever shape the center of cultural retreat takes, it won't be exempt from the challenges posed by fallen human nature. After all, if Christianity is true, we are all part of the problem. In this sense there's an inherently self-congratulatory aspect to the ubiquitous statements about our nation's precipitous cultural decline. If the culture is in decline, we're certainly numbered in that decline.

One of the best ways to puncture our sense of self-righteousness is to do the hard work seeing those with whom we have deep disagreements as human beings. Drawing from cultural anthropology, Alan Jacobs introduces us to an arresting phrase: "repugnant cultural other" (RCO).² An RCO is more than your ideological opponent; it's the person you're tempted to call evil, the person who occupies all of the positions you believe to be the most harmful. Whether we want to admit it or not, all of us have an RCO. Here's a good litmus test: if you consider a basic concession to the common humanity of a certain person to be a form of treason or compromise, you've got your RCO. Needless to say, said person frequently holds some form of political office. If you're a Christian, however, your RCO is more than a fellow human being; they are your neighbor. When Christ put the words *good* and *Samaritan* together for his Jewish audience, he knew what he was doing (Luke 10:25-37). By equating the RCO of his listeners with their neighbor, Jesus was giving a firm rebuke to their deep-seated prejudice. In our day, many of us need to hear phrases like "the good Republican," "the good Democrat," "the good social justice warrior," "the good Muslim," and "the good Hindu," to feel the full prophetic force of our Lord's words.

Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff identify the notion that “life is a battle between good people and evil people” as one of the great untruths of our age because it conveniently takes us off the hook and effectively justifies any measures we take against those we deem evil.³ Interestingly, neither Haidt nor Lukianoff is a Christian—Haidt is himself a thoroughgoing naturalist. Given Christ’s words on the matter, however, Christians can go further and declare that this untruth is both idolatrous and hateful. It’s idolatrous because it elevates us above the common fray of humanity, and it’s hateful because it conveniently justifies our vilification of others. This mindset generates RCOs, not neighbors. It is indeed a thoroughly un-Christian habit of mind. The sad irony is that if our homes are characterized by suspicion, fear, and paranoia, they are mirroring the surrounding culture, not challenging it.

The final harmful byproduct of the fear-protects mindset is the glamorization of the forbidden. Though the phrase may sound a bit cumbersome, it simply refers to the well-known fact that when something is declared off-limits it instantly becomes more appealing. When Cameron and his wife, Heather, were navigating the toddler years with their son, for instance, they quickly learned that sentences beginning with “don’t” were not nearly as effective as those that began by offering an alternative: “Look at *this*.” From our earliest years we are incorrigible trespassers. In the words of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath: “Forbid us thing, and that desire we.”⁴

It’s important to stress that we’re using the term *forbidden* and not *evil*. Christians recognize that we live in a fallen world, but we also acknowledge that God’s grace shines through in surprising places. It’s one of the reasons the apostle Paul is able to shed light on the gospel by quoting from pagan poets in Acts 17. Numerous Christians continue to follow Paul’s example by drawing on everyone from poets to directors to songwriters to skeptical philosophers. We’ll explore Paul’s strategy in greater detail in a later

chapter—for now, it’s worth noting that Paul is not necessarily being prescriptive in his use of these two non-Christian voices. We can applaud his creative approach to evangelism while recognizing that he’s not enjoining all of us to read Aratus and Miletus.

In fact, given Paul’s clear teaching on anything that constitutes a hindrance to someone else’s faith, he would have conceivably placed these two poets off-limits to plenty of folks in his day in much the same way that we would with our contemporary poets, be they actual poets or filmmakers, novelists, or musicians. Paul can draw on these artists in the rarified atmosphere of the Areopagus, but they don’t make an appearance in any of his epistles. Likewise, the fact that your pastor may glean some theological insights from David Fincher’s *Seven* doesn’t mean that he’s instructing you to drop everything you’re doing and immediately screen the film. As we think about the boundaries and restrictions in our own homes, let’s keep in mind that they’re not necessarily binding on everyone. Different temperaments, sensibilities, and sensitivities are important factors where cultural artifacts are concerned. Though the fear-protects mindset often oversimplifies things by issuing a sweeping condemnation, Scripture paints a more complex picture of our cultural landscape.

That said, we all know restrictions cast a powerful spell over everything they touch. Declare something off-limits and it’s like waving a magic wand that instantly provokes desire. Remember the marketing campaigns behind old horror films? “Do you have a weak heart?” “A weak constitution?” “Are you easily shocked?” “If so, avoid this film!” The fact that this is just garden-variety reverse psychology does little to undermine its effectiveness.

From Pandora to Prometheus we know that our curiosity about anything forbidden is as powerful as it is insatiable. But the most incisive voice on the matter belongs to the serpent in the Garden of Eden: “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened,

and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). Eve bites into the forbidden fruit because she’s lured by the promise of secret knowledge that will make her “like God.” This satanic invitation has lost none of its appeal in our day: we remain a race of incorrigible rebels. Our penchant for playing God continually inspires us to transgress all boundaries and push human experience to the furthest frontiers in every arena, from sexuality to science.

Since fear protects tends to cast the outside world in almost exclusively forbidden terms, the outside world often takes on an enchanting aspect, particularly for the adolescent members of the home. Growing up in the cloistered environment of the mission field, Cameron well remembers this culture of deep anxiety regarding anything outside the church. On one occasion he was spending the night with a friend. They were talking in his room and without thinking, Cameron turned on a CD he’d brought along. Instantly, his friend’s dad popped his head in and pointed to the stereo. “Is that Christian?” Blinking, Cameron responded, “No.” His friend’s dad wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Turn it off.”

This is not to say kids should get *carte blanche* on all cultural engagement. Parents are responsible for guiding the young hearts and minds in their homes, and each child is unique in their sensibilities and sensitivities. Rather, what we want to highlight here is a kneejerk reaction that frequently backfires. There’s a fine line between establishing wholesome boundaries and a self-nullifying spiritual paranoia that undermines itself by imbuing forbidden objects with outsized power. In this case, by overestimating the power of a particular song—the work of a decidedly mediocre rock band hardly worthy of the compliment, by the way—this dad greatly enhanced its appeal. Cynical marketers know that scaring parents is an effective way to sell records.

There’s nothing wrong with asking someone to turn off a song that violates the standards of your home, but treating it like some

kind of cursed object that defiles whatever it touches is a way of thinking that shares more in common with animism than with Christianity. While we don't want to underestimate the power of harmful influences, we don't want to overestimate them either. Given that anything forbidden exerts a powerful and primal pull on all of us, we need to avoid any kind of reaction that intensifies the appeal. Though there's no one-size-fits-all formula for such an undertaking, we can begin by establishing a precedent of exercising healthy caution and parental authority in place of fear and control.

RECOVERING THE FEAR OF THE LORD

What role does fear play in your home? The fear of losing one's faith or of our kids losing theirs; the fear of contamination from bad or impure ideas; the fear of bowing to cultural trends and priorities. These are not matters to be taken lightly. Discernment ought to replace our habitual fear of the surrounding world. We'd like to draw attention to an important distinction that Stuart encountered in his early years. Deeply immersed in the tension of being in the world but not of it, he came across the words of Richard John Neuhaus, who proposed that as Christians we are "in the world and not of the world," but also "*for* the world."

Fear need not guide us. We choose faith and hope as we live in love. We face life's many challenges with seriousness and practicality, but we also know the liberty of casting our cares on the one who forms our hearts and shepherds our homes. In sharp contrast to our culture's chronic anxiety, Scripture extols the fear of the Lord: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7).

The Christian view of reality is rooted in our understanding of the sovereign God who is the creator and the sustainer of all—the one in whom "all things hold together." The psalmist tells us "our

times are in His hands” (Psalm 31:15) and that he is our light, so “whom should we fear?” (Psalm 27:1). As Jesus was about to ascend to the Father, he promised the disciples that he would be with them always. This promise of his presence is an anchor for our souls because it reminds us that there is no place where we can escape the Lord’s presence. If you truly believe that Christ is with you in every circumstance of your life and that he alone sustains you, fear cannot control you. The biblical narrative, with all its hardships, sufferings, and glory, reminds us that we do indeed live in a fallen world. But it also tells of the risen Savior who is soon returning to make all things new. For this reason, Christians are in the world, and not of it—but also *for* it.

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