

## What Is the “Sin of Human Respect”? by Msgr. Pope

On one level “human respect” seems like a good thing. After all, we ought to respect, honor and appreciate one another. What then is meant by the “sin of human respect”? It is that sin wherein we fear man more than God; we are more concerned with what people think of us than what God thinks of us. This is an unholy, sinful fear, and is at the root of many of our sins, both of commission and of omission.

Consider some examples:

1. **A man** goes up to a group of other men who are talking about the boss and also speaking inappropriately about some women in the office. He knows that their disparaging comments about the boss are unfair or even untrue. He also knows that talking about the women in the office using crude sexual imagery and lustful references is wrong. But because he wants to “fit in,” he joins in the conversation and contributes to what he knows is wrong. He laughs at the off-color jokes and makes no attempt to steer the conversation in a more appropriate direction. He does this because he fears rejection and is more concerned about what his co-workers think of him than what God thinks of him. He fears man more than he does God. That God is displeased with his actions is less important to him than that any of these men should be displeased.
2. **A young woman** knows that sex before marriage is wrong and that this displeases God. However, she has dated a number of men now and has slept with most of them. She does this partly because she fears rejection. Perhaps if she does not give in to the desires of the young men she dates they will reject her and she will be alone. She thinks that a woman “has to do this” in order to be popular and desirable. She fears man more than she does God. What human beings think is more important to her than what God thinks. She may well minimize the importance of God’s displeasure by saying to herself, “Oh well, God understands.” But at the same time, she maximizes in her mind the importance of the displeasure of weak and fallible human beings,

thinking that displeasing them would lead to catastrophe. She respects—that is, fears—man more than she does God.

3. A **pastor** of a parish has a mandate from God and the Church to preach the whole counsel of God but he struggles to preach the “hard” things. After all, teaching on things like abortion, fornication, divorce, contraception, homosexual activity, euthanasia, and capital punishment causes some people to be upset. He fears this anger, fears offending people, fears being misunderstood. Once, when he spoke about abortion (because the Bishop mandated it), a few parishioners came up to him and told him that he should not bring politics into the pulpit. Once, when he had preached about the problem of divorce (the topic of that day’s Gospel), a (divorced) woman approached him after Mass saying that she felt hurt and “excluded.” Experiences like these have led the priest to “play it safe.” He always starts the homily with a joke and the people seem to love him for it. He chooses to preach only in abstractions and generalities. He exhorts people to be a little more kind, a little more generous, but avoids specificity. He does this because he fears man more than he does God. That God might be displeased that His people are not hearing the truth about important moral issues or receiving proper instruction in discipleship is a vague and distant fear to this priest. But one person raising an eyebrow at what he says is enough to ruin his whole week. Thus he goes silent as a prophet and becomes a people-pleaser instead. He respects—fears—man more than he does God.

4. A **mother** knows that she is to raise her children in the fear of the Lord and train them in godly way, but oh, the protests when she tells them to do their chores, or go to bed, or do their homework! It’s just such a hassle to endure their anger and disappointment. She also remembers how stern her parents were and how she had vowed she would be nicer to her own children. So, little by little, she lets her authority erode and the children more often than not get their way. Her husband is not a strong disciplinarian and he wants to be thought of as “cool” by his children and their friends. God’s insistence on prayer, discipline, and respect for elders, gives way to what the children want. The oldest, a teenager, doesn’t want to go to Mass anymore. But after

all, “You can’t force religion on kids,” they think. Here, too, the parents fear their children more than they do God. They have greater respect for their children than they do for God.

So these are some examples of the “sin of human respect.” It runs very deep in our wounded nature and leads to many other sins as well. Many people are desperate for attention, respect, acceptance, and approval from other human beings. Many of these same individuals, though (even the religiously observant), struggle to be nearly as concerned with what God thinks of them or whether He approves of their behavior.

**God has a straightforward solution to this:** we should fear Him and no one else. There is an old saying, “If I kneel before God, I can stand before any man.” It makes sense that it is a lot easier to fear (respect) one, than many. The more we learn to fear (respect) God, the less concerned we become with what others think. This is not an invitation to become a sociopath who cares not a whit what others think. We are to remain polite, groom ourselves, and not intentionally pick fights. But in the end, we are instructed by the Lord to be freed of all the fearful trepidation of what others think.

**Calling this is a straightforward solution refers more to its description than its execution.** It is not easy to extract ourselves from this very deep drive; in fact, it takes a life time. But the first step to healing is admitting we have a problem. Then we begin to see it for what it is, understand its moves, and let the Lord steadily free us.

**Let us also be clear: the fear of the Lord that is counseled here is not a cowering and servile fear.** If this is all one can muster, though, it is better than having no fear at all! But the real goal is to have a filial fear of God, fearing to offend Him because we love Him. This type of fear of the Lord holds Him in awe. It is to have a reverence for Him rooted in deep love and gratitude. Out of this love and gratitude we fear to offend Him more than offending any other.

**Perhaps some Scripture quotes** that address various aspects of the problem of human respect and the remedy of holy fear will be a fitting conclusion to this reflection:

1. *Through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil (Prov 16:6).*
2. *Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD (Prov 23:17).*
3. *Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil (Prov 15:16).*
4. *The fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning (Ex 20:20).*
5. *You alone are to be feared O Lord (Psalm 76:7).*
6. *God is more awesome than all who surround him (Psalm 89:7).*
7. *I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side (Psalm 3:4-5).*
8. *I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them (Jer 32:39).*
9. *The Pharisees came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth” (Mark 12:14).*
10. *Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets (Luke 6:26).*
11. *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels (Luke 9:26).*

12. *And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna (Matt 10:28).*

13. *If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you (Jn 15:18-19).*

14. *It does not concern me in the least that I be judged by you or any human tribunal; I do not even pass judgment on myself; I am not conscious of anything against me, but I do not thereby stand acquitted; the one who judges me is the Lord (1 Cor 4:3).*

15. *From now on, let no one make troubles for me; for I bear the marks of Jesus on my body (Gal 6:17).*

16. *We know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience (2 Cor 5:11).*