

In the gospel, Jesus gave us a very simple commandment: "Fear no one." But then he seems to qualify it: "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." What is Gehenna? And who can destroy both body and soul there? Historically Gehenna was a valley southwest of Jerusalem where an idolatrous cult offered children in sacrifice to their false god. When Jesus uses the word, he is referring to hell. Hell is the state of eternal separation from God as a consequence of unrepented mortal sins.

Who has the power to destroy both the body and soul in Gehenna? God? Satan? Someone else? All three? This quote is directly from the RSV study Bible: "Since Satan deceives and tempts souls into sin, he should be feared and resisted as our worst enemy. However, the prophet Isaiah says: "The Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread." In view of that statement, God should also be feared. He alone administers perfect justice and can send the faithless to eternal punishment. A holy fear of God is thus necessary to avoid sin and its consequences."

I have to admit, I have a problem with that answer. Hell is the state of eternal separation from God as a consequence of unrepented mortal sins. What is a mortal sin? This is a quote from the catechism: Mortal sin is when we consciously and freely choose to do something grave against the divine law and contrary to our final destiny. There are three conditions for a sin to be a mortal sin: grave matter (it has to be objectively evil), full knowledge that it is grave matter, and deliberate consent (freely and knowingly committing the sin). God rightfully administers justice. Satan deceives and tempts us. But if we have to freely consent to committing the sin, don't we have a role to play in our eternal destiny? We ourselves have the power to destroy ourselves by refusing to turn back to God and asking him to forgive us. The punishments of hell are real but they can be avoided by turning back to God and asking for his help and forgiveness. This is very important to consider in a society where people very often blame everyone else for their problems without being willing to consider their own personal responsibility. We must have reverential and awe-filled fear of God because he is our creator and infinitely greater than us; but he also loves us and does not desire the death of the sinner; he wants to show us his mercy. We should fear Satan because he hates us and wants to destroy us by leading us away from God and entrapping us in the state of hell alongside him and his minions. We also need to recognize our own responsibility in our response or lack of response to the graces and salvation that God wants to give us.

Back to Jesus' commandment to fear no one. He then continued: "Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known. What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops." The church gives us this in combination with the Jeremiah reading in which Jeremiah is calling out to the Lord in the midst of persecution, including being betrayed by his friends. How did Jeremiah respond? "But the LORD is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph... Sing to the LORD, praise the LORD, for he has rescued the life of the poor from the power of the wicked!" Jeremiah was being persecuted for his work as a prophet which is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. He was preaching what God told him to preach to people who didn't want to hear it. Jesus is telling us to do the same thing. "Proclaim it on the housetops!" We do not need to fear any human being when we do this. They might make our lives difficult. They might preach hate against us. They might even kill us, but with God as our champion, we don't need to be afraid of anything or anyone as long as we are trying our best to remain faithful to him.