

6.19

Fear, Joy, Worship, and Doubt in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's Gospel pairs typically negative traits with typically positive ones in ways that are ambiguously compatible.

Fear and Joy

[The women] left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. (Matt. 28:8)

Joy typically is a positive quality in Matthew's Gospel:

- “When [the magi] saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy” (2:10).
- “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he had and buys that field” (13:44).
- “Well done, good and trustworthy slave . . . enter into the joy of your master” (25:21, 23).

But joy also can be a sign of superficial or shallow faith:

- “As for what was sown on the rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and

when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word,
that person immediately falls away” (13:20–21).

Fear may seem like a negative quality, but it often does accompany
worship:

- “When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ . . . And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly, you are the Son of God!’” (14:26, 33).
- “When the disciples heard this [God’s voice at Jesus’s transfiguration], they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear” (17:6).
- “Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’” (27:54).
- And Jesus says, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell” (10:28).

The Ambiguous Compatibility. joy is what turns fear into worship;
fear prevents worship from being shallow.

Worship and Doubt

When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

(Matt. 28:17)

Worship typically is a positive quality in Matthew's Gospel:

- Magi worship Jesus (2:11).
- A leper worships Jesus (8:2).
- A leader worships Jesus (9:18).
- A Canaanite woman worships Jesus (15:25).
- The mother of James and John worships Jesus (20:20).
- Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" worship Jesus (28:9).

But worship also can be superficial:

- "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" (15:8–9; cf. Isa. 29:13).

Doubt ("little faith") seems to be a negative quality:

- "If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith" (6:30).
- "He said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm" (8:26).

- “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’” (14:31).

And yet it is not a fatal flaw:

- A “mustard seed” of faith is all that is required (17:20).
- Jesus encourages seeking, asking, and knocking (6:33; 7:7).

And those who doubt are able to offer sincere worship:

- Immediately after being rebuked by Jesus for doubt, Peter and the other disciples worship Jesus as the Son of God (14:31–33).
- Worship and doubt coincide in the community that receives the Great Commission (28:17–20).

The Ambiguous Compatibility: worship brings doubting faith to life; doubt prevents worship from being self-assured and vain.