

Have you ever been afraid? How did it feel? Fear is paralyzing, right? It freezes the body and clouds the mind handicapping the ability to think clearly about what we face and need to do about it.

Some fears are healthy, for example, the kind that will keep us from jumping off a building or trying to pet a lion at the zoo—or watch a Cowboys game. That is healthy fear because it keeps us away from harm. But that is not the kind we are talking about today.

When I ask if you have ever been afraid, I am thinking about the life experiences that have robbed you of your humanity, that have taken away your love and compassion; moments when you suddenly could not recognize yourself because your personality had been disfigured by a life overwhelmed by fear. **This type of fear is not a friend but a foe. It breaks people's hearts and empties the soul.**

Have you ever seen someone in the grip of fear? Surely you have. If there is one thing that the last couple of years have “gifted” us besides disease and death, it is fear, the kind that has affected our social and emotional well-being in ways that we are just beginning to realize.

But that is not the only fear that is in my mind today. I am also thinking, for example, when someone has been chronically bullied at school that develops a fear of rejection. Or when parents, a spouse, children, or friends abandon us leading us to believe that we may not be worthy of being loved; therefore, we fear relationships and are suspicious of other people's intentions with us. Or, if we are constantly experiencing negative criticism from those around us, we develop low self-esteem and confidence in whatever we do.

What a terrible loss of our self when we allow external negative and even evil voices to become the internal voice of hearts; the voices that tell us, “You can’t, you won’t,” eventually becoming “I can’t, and I won’t.”

You can see this happening in our communities and over social media, we project our self-esteem through how we relate to others. If our self-esteem is informed by fear, our sense of personal worth decreases dramatically, even to the point of disliking and rejecting who we are, hence, disliking and rejecting others. (How can others be happy if you are not?)

Bonhoeffer said that “Fear secretly gnaws and eats away at all the ties that bind a person to God and to others.” In other words, **fear divides and destroys; fear separates us from each other even to the point of making us treat others as enemies.** And when we treat people as enemies, they act as enemies against us too. That is how fear self-reproduces. It is contagious and spreads quickly to others, multiplying into many variants. **Fear begets fear.** But just like a virus, without a host, it dies.

Can this be cured? Is there a sort of a “vaccine” against fear? I believe there is one, and it works 100% whenever it is applied.

Let’s explore this with the Scriptures for today. The first text is from Matthew 25: 4-18,

“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

In this chapter, Jesus is teaching about God's kingdom and how we respond to it. This part is what is known as The Parable of the Talents. Here, Jesus shares a story about a businessman making the necessary preparations before a long journey. As he does, he calls three workers and gives them each responsibility over a portion of his wealth. Each is given a different amount to tend according to their ability and two of them double it through skillful trading and investing. When the man returned, these two servants proudly turned over their profits and received congratulations from him.

However, the servant with the one bag of gold took a different action. He decided to bury the money in the ground so he could feel secure in the knowledge that he had taken a safe, risk-free course of action on his master's behalf. **But he was not motivated by responsibility but fear. He was afraid of losing the money and being punished for it.** So, rather than investing it, this servant hid it. He was proud of what he did, but what happened is that his fear undermined his capacity to be productive and, in the end, fear robbed him of everything.

If you have ever thought that acting out of fear will keep you safe, remember this guy. Acting out of fear may give you a sense of security for a while, but in the end, you will find yourself empty, with nothing to show. **Fear is costly; life and time can't afford it.**

The key to understanding fear in this Scripture is by asking, "Why was the servant afraid?" The servant was afraid of losing that which his master entrusted him for fear of punishment. He feared an outcome that he imagined in his mind.

Ernest Hemingway argued that "[Fear] is almost always simply a lack of ability to suspend the functioning of the imagination." In other words, Hemingway is saying that by

thinking too much about what is wrong, bad, or the challenges before us, we hold ourselves back. This approach to life frames our perceptions of the world in a catastrophic manner.

Are you experiencing life through fear? **Whatever fears you may have right now, whether you fear disappointment, rejection, punishment, shame, or sin, you can't let them dictate your life.** You can't let them define you. You can't let them govern your mind and manufacture catastrophic thoughts.

This is a critical life process because **we can't experience a good life with a negative mindset by fearing an idea of an imaginary catastrophic future fed by our traumas, anxiety, and negative and evil voices around us.**

A wise person once said, "fear leads to anger, and anger leads to hate." And may I add, hate disfigures us. **We were not created for fear, anger, or hate. That is not who we are. Instead, we were created as children of God—for goodness.**

Did you know this? Have you forgotten this?

The problem with the servant was his attitude and mentality about failure and punishment. The fears of his imagination triggered his assumptions. For him and us, fear is a disease that slowly eats away our humanity.

Here is where the second Scripture speaks to us and gives us the answer to the question of, "Can fear be cured?",

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love." (1 John 4:18)

These are the words of the apostle John. He is talking about having confidence in God's love. **He tells us that fear loses its hold on us if we know we are loved and confident about it. In other words, love is the vaccine against fear.** And this is not a platitude or feel-good theology; this is tangible healing of the mind and soul.

I researched this from a scientific standpoint, and I learned that love and health are intertwined in surprising ways. Dr. Harry Reis, PhD, co-editor of the Encyclopedia of Human Relationships explained in a WebMD research article, "There is very nice evidence that people who participate in satisfying, long-term relationships fare better on a whole variety of health measures." (<https://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/features/health-benefits>) The key is to "feel connected to other people, feel respected and valued by other people, and feel a sense of belonging," he said.

In this research, they cite ten research-backed ways that love and health are linked. For example, they found that love leads to fewer doctor's visits, less depression and substance abuse, lower blood pressure, less anxiety, natural pain control, better stress management, fewer colds, faster healing, longer life, and happier life. (Oh, did I mention "good looks"? Yes, and "good looks" too.)

Love changes everything about our humanity, whether is a mental, emotional, physical, or spiritual condition. Love heals and gives life by connecting us to others—including God. That is what John is telling us and what God does for us.

This is why it is so important to let people know that God loves them and to let our loved ones know that we love them too. **When people know they are love, they become healthy.** And, that is why in this same text of 1 John 4, in addition to be confident about God's love for

us, John encourages us to love one another by saying, “[those] that love God should love [their] brothers [and sisters].” (4:21)

With this in mind, we can understand what happened to the servant who was frightened to lose his master’s money. His fear of punishment consumed him and ultimately led him to a dark place of loss. **Fear produced nothing in him. In the same way, fear robs us and leaves us empty-handed.**

This happens all the time. **People lose jobs, friends, scholarships, and family because of pernicious fear that leads to an unhealthy life of contempt, distrusts, and self-sabotage.**

But today, we are learning that **God does not want to punish us.** That will be contrary to God’s character. God is love, and in him, there is no fear of punishment. The apostle John said it best when he said in John 3:17, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

So, here is the good news, **just as fear ultimately leads us to anger and hate, love leads us to peace and hope.** Peace and hope are the will of God in every person.

How does this happen? Fair question. **It starts by us learning that we are more than the bad things that happen to us and that mistakes don’t define us.** Instead, God’s love gives us new eyes to see a larger life, with a hope for the future. It moves us from darkness to light, from death to everlasting life, from punishment to reconciliation.

What frightens you today? What fears have kept your mind subjugated? What fears have dried up the love in your heart? This can be healed by knowing life is larger than our concerns; there is goodness out there and we can be a part of it through faith in Jesus the Christ.

My friends, don't be like the servant and fear punishment; instead, trust grace. Let us change our focus from fear to love, from punishment and shame to God's grace for our lives and family. Let's find and welcome peace and hope in Jesus Christ.

I know there are fears you came with today that you must not take with you after you leave this place. So let them go, trust God's grace and love. Accept that you are loved because it is the truth. God's love is the vaccine against fear. Once you know you are loved and are confident about it, fear loses its grip on you. **There is no punishment in love.**

Get vaxxed against fear today.

“Look to Christ when you are afraid, think of Christ, keep him before your eyes, call upon Christ and pray to him, believe that he is with you now, helping you. Then fear will grow pale and fade away, and you will be free, through your faith in our strong and living Savior, Jesus Christ.” Bonhoeffer