

Today, we continue our sermon series “All the Feels: How God Created Me.” As I explained last week, this series explores the connection between faith and emotions, helping us better understand our emotions and find ways to draw strength and wisdom from Scripture.

For this, we are using the movie *Inside Out* from Pixar to navigate the different emotions we experience as humans. For those who haven’t seen it, *Inside Out* is an animated film that delves into the mind of a young girl named Riley, where five emotions—Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust—navigate her through life’s challenges. Today, our focus is on the fourth emotion: Fear.

What is fear? Fear is an emotion induced by a perceived threat, a feeling that we all have experienced at some point in our lives. It informs and influences our way of thinking and making decisions, ultimately leading to changes in behavior, such as running away, hiding, or freezing in response to traumatic events. In the movie *Inside Out*, fear is what keeps Riley safe as a child. Here he is: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85z4N_sHXJw

Fear is portrayed as a tall, lanky, lavender-skinned character with a long nose wearing magenta bow ties and purple slacks. He is a bundle of nerves—fearful, nervous, timid, paranoid, but also diligent, responsible, and intelligent. In short, fear plays a crucial role in keeping Riley safe. However, while fear is crucial for safety, it can also turn into unhealthy emotions if not managed properly.

As we grow older, we encounter different kinds of fears that lead to unhealthy emotions. Behavioral fear, for example, can turn into greed, jealousy, distrust, and envy: “What if I don’t have enough money? I must take all I can now!” “What if I’m not as good as them?” “What if they betray me?” “What if everything falls apart?” These fears, often caused by external factors, create internal doubt and affect our behavior. Existential fear, on the other hand, involves deeper anxieties about existence and purpose: “What if I die and leave my family behind?” “What if I get seriously ill?” “What if I grow old and end up alone?” These fears challenge our understanding of life and can paralyze us, keeping us from embracing life fully.

Whether behavioral or existential, when fear turns into negative emotions, it paralyzes us and keeps us from embracing life. It is like racing your car engine while in neutral— it wastes fuel, stresses the motor, and gets us nowhere. And what a terrible loss of our self when we allow improbable or uncontrollable circumstances and external negative voices to become the internal reality of our hearts that tell us, “You can’t, you won’t.”

To help us understand fear further, Jesus gives an example in 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.

Why was the servant afraid? What made him afraid? The servant was afraid of losing what his master had entrusted to him for fear of punishment. He feared an outcome that he imagined in his own imagination. Before trying anything, he had already decided that he could not do anything profitable with his talent. And just like an ostrich, he basically hid his head in the sand. His existential fear of inadequacy determined his fearful behavior.

Ernest Hemingway argued that "[Fear] is almost always simply a lack of ability to suspend the functioning of the imagination." In other words, Hemingway says that we hold ourselves back by thinking too much about what is wrong or bad or the challenges before us. This approach to life frames our perceptions of the world catastrophically.

I am a husband and dad, and sometimes, I think catastrophically. Sometimes, I experience the existential fear of losing my family to illness or accidents. But I can't live like that, nor can they. What am I supposed to do? Don't let them get out of the house and wrap them all in bubble wrap? If I did such a thing, my fears would be self-fulfilling. This is what happened to the negligent servant; he was so afraid of losing what he had by focusing on assumptions triggered by the fears of his imagination that he acted out of fear of punishment, and ironically, that is what led him to it.

This happens to us, too. Like the negligent servant, the problem is not whether we have much or little but our attitude and mentality toward failure, punishment, or loss. We can have much or little, but what really makes the difference is our mindset, the way we think about ourselves, others, and life as a whole.

As we saw in the movie *Inside Out*, fear is not always bad. Healthy fear can keep us safe and motivate us to make smarter choices. But chronic fear can become so big that it keeps us from trying, learning, and growing. Think of it this way: in our lives, fear can be a signal, a protector, but it should not be our master.

Here is an interesting fact: the Scriptures tell us, "Do not be afraid," 366 times—once for each day of the year, reminding us of God's encouragement. Yet, we still struggle with fear.

Why? Notice that it does not say, “Don’t feel afraid,” but “Don’t be afraid.” The Scriptures do not tell us not to feel afraid; they tell us not to be afraid. In other words, fear is an emotion to be managed, not to be managed by it. Even when we feel afraid, we can choose how we live and what drives us. And the most powerful motivator, stronger than fear, is love.

Consider what 1 John 4:18 says, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.” John 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. And this is not a platitude; this is tangible healing of the mind and soul. I researched this from a scientific standpoint, and I learned that love and health are surprisingly intertwined. 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.

This research cites 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.

Love changes everything about our humanity, whether it is a mental, emotional, physical, or spiritual condition. Love heals and gives life. That is what John tells us— what God does for us. If only the negligent servant had been led by love instead of fear of punishment.

What does all this mean to us, then? Here is what we can learn: Allow healthy fear to keep you safe from harmful situations, but don’t be led or controlled by it. Instead, be driven by God’s love. By embracing God’s love, our relationships can flourish. When we are led by love, we learn to trust and open up to others, overcoming the fear of rejection. We can let go of jealousy and envy, celebrating others’ successes instead of resenting them. Our families can become havens of support and understanding rather than battlegrounds of suspicion and anger. Friends can become true companions, free from the shadows of distrust and fear.

And perhaps even more powerful, love lets us accept our human limitations. My love for my family is more powerful than my fear of something happening to them. This love helps me accept my human limitations, which helps me deal with existential fear by acknowledging that illness, death, and life’s challenges are inevitable. So, when we worry, “What if I die and leave my family behind?” “What if I get seriously ill?” or “What if I lose a child or my spouse?” faith reminds us that God’s love provides comfort and strength in these moments. By trusting in God’s love, we can overcome these existential fears, knowing that our lives hold a deeper significance that transcends our current realities.

Here is the good news: If we focus on God’s perfect love, nothing and no one will stop us from overcoming our fears. We may still feel and experience fear, but we won’t be punished or controlled by it.

As we conclude today, I invite you to reflect on these questions:

- How has fear impacted your relationships with family and friends?
- In what ways have you allowed fear to control your decisions and actions?
- What steps can you take to fully embrace God's love and let it drive out your fears?
- How can you apply the lessons from the parable of the talents to use your gifts more effectively?

Remember, we serve a God who is bigger than our fears and calls us to live in his power, love, and self-discipline. As we face our fears, let us do so with the assurance that God is with us, guiding us and giving us the strength to overcome in this life and the next one.