

Casting Out Fear (Part One)

“Mature love drives out fear”

Reflection 10 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

Again we turn our attention to being a place that helps us live a life of love. I’ll begin by reminding us that this isn’t easy. On one level, it sounds easy. After all, culture seems devoted to the pursuit of love. The music we listen to is about almost nothing else. And yet what our society really pursues, when we take a closer look, is more sex than love. And when it comes down to the arts of love, we struggle. We struggle with how to disagree graciously, how to win and lose graciously, how to resolve conflict, how to forgive, how to challenge and contest what is unloving – and many, many other matters.

So it’s not easy. I struggle all the time with really loving others. It’s a spiritual task to love and it takes discipline, character and integrity to love parents, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, daughters and sons, friends, even fellow Christians. Often it’s not easy. Often it’s hard. It’s part of stretching you and making you a larger person than you were. And if you don’t see it as a spiritual task, a mission, a calling, a life project, you still do not quite understand what love really is.

And then there are the difficult people in our lives, the loud and obnoxious, the ones who are always stirring, the ones who are invariably negative and judgmental, rude and self-absorbed. I struggle every day to open my heart to the people right in front of me. I should be doing better than that, right? But I get busy. I’m on the clock. And here’s this person on the phone or in my office doorway, and I’m under deadline and I have to remind myself to be loving. This love stuff is hard. And I haven’t even mentioned learning to love those who are very different from us, those in other faith traditions, those from other lands whom we are told over and over to fear.

But here are some things I have learned about loving. And # 1 (star this one!) is: The power is in our loving with little or no thought to whether we are loved. It’s one of the most dynamic ideas ever known; it comes from the heart of God. It says that by the power of our love we can often resurrect what is loving and loveable in another person. You’ve all but written someone off, but by the power of your love you can make them loveable again. It, however, all comes undone, it becomes toxic, when our concern slides back to ourselves, to whether or not we are loved.

So the power in life is in our loving, with little or no thought to whether we are loved. That’s # 1, but certain things follow from it, that: that I must seek only to love and not to be loved; that I can love someone fully without ever fully understanding them; that I must always respect and find joy in the mystery, the sacredness, the hidden destiny of the other person so what I must do is contribute lovingly to that person’s calling and destiny; that I am never to injure or hurt or give pain to those I love, and when I do, I must respond in true sorrow, as in “I’m sorry; I’m really sorry; I want never to hurt you;” that I must learn to truly love the other person himself or herself, and not simply how she or he makes me feel about myself; that I must learn to think and act in such a way that one day in heaven I will be able to love without regret, and with honor and joy.

And I have learned that always, in every moment, in every circumstance, I must trust God if I would really find my way to mature love. That of course means I have to quit being afraid. Being afraid makes it all but impossible to love. We live in a fearmongering society. It's in the interest of some to keep us fearful. It's what certain kinds of leaders do so that we will cede more power to them. But sometimes it's just the way we're wired. We're wired to be fearful. My mother was. She grew up in the prairie provinces of Canada during the Great Depression. Her mother died when she was seven or eight; her father died when she was twelve or thirteen. That could make anyone fearful, I guess. But as understandable as it is, it's still no help. It just fogs up vision on all sorts of things.

I turn then to 1 John 4:7-21. No one discusses love better than the apostle John. And in 1 John he returns again and again to his core message, the truth he learned from Jesus the night before the crucifixion, that night indelibly stamped on his consciousness (John 13:34-35), the truth that we really must love one another (1 John 2:7-11; 3:11-20). And in 1 John 4:7-21 he writes one of the greatest good news passages ever written. He says: Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God (verse 7). He says: If we love one another God lives in us and his love is made mature in us (12). And he says: We can know this by looking inside to the Spirit of God within us (13). He goes on: God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God in him (16). And then finally he says that perfect (mature) love drives out fear (18), because fear has to do with punishment, and John is saying: You who have truly entered into this life of love need fear no such thing.

I don't want you, he says, to see life, to see God, that way again. I don't want you to see God as an angry, vengeful tyrant acting in petty ways we train our children not to. I don't want you to see a God whose habitual state is anger, God with a hair-trigger temper, God refusing to accept anything but perfect people in a perfect church. Because you will never live a life of love if you see God that way.

That's why many church circles are of no help in living a life of love. In fact, they make it harder. Seeing God as hateful, they act hatefully. What they claim as righteousness is, in truth, hatefulness, and they are rightly rejected by others as hateful. I want you to see, John says, that God is love. God's a shepherd who goes out into the wilderness looking for us when we are lost! God runs to us when we are still a long ways off. God became one of us and died for us. God bleeds for us. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us. So a woman is brought in before him, caught in sexual sin, and he will protect her from her accusers, and he will not condemn her; instead he gently redirects her life. This, this, is the gospel.

But what I really want us to see is this very destructive connection between love and fear. Mature love drives out fear. But of course fear also drives out mature love.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week