

Facing the Fears that Ruin Relationships

We've been looking at transforming seven key areas of your life. We've looked at your spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health. This week I want to look at relational health. Transforming your relationships and making them better.

God created the entire universe and created a sustaining environment for humans so we could be part of God's family. In the creation of that family, God made us very similar to one another. In terms of DNA all humans are 99.5% similar to all other humans. While it's true that no two humans are genetically identical, (even identical twins have genetic differences due to mutations and variations occurring during development,) genetically the differences in us are miniscule.

But God did build in some key differences in us in individual temperament, talents, capacities and our gender. I think God did that because, since we're not God, none of us could possibly be everything or do everything or understand everything or design everything, so God created us with variations so that when we cooperate with one another, we can do more and be more. God made us for one another.

When God created us, we were meant to cooperate as perfectly as our limits would allow. Even before sin came into human lives, we weren't God, so we weren't perfect, but we were designed to work together. Things would still work reasonably well if there was no sin. There'd be no sadness, sorrow, suffering, deceit, manipulation, jealousy. In short, we wouldn't need presidential elections! Our relationships and social connections would work as God designed them.

But sin did come into our relationships. Let me read from Genesis 3, picking up the story at verse 6. *"...she [Eve] took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees. Then the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?' He replied, 'I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.' 'Who told you that you were naked?' the Lord God asked. 'Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?' The man replied, 'It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it.' Then the Lord God asked the woman, 'What have you done?' 'The serpent deceived me,' she replied. 'That's why I ate it.'"* After this, God told them that there were going to be major consequences from what they had done - pain, difficulties, a hard life, even death.

This is filled with enormous amounts of spiritual truth. But I just want to point out some relational truths. In this we see the three fundamental fears that pop up in every relationship. They damage and destroy potential in every relationship.

The first fear we learn is the fear of exposure, so, **1! The Fear of Exposure Makes Me Distant.** We can never get as close to people as we might want and certainly not as close as God would want. We'd like to be closer to our spouses - to have a greater level of intimacy in partnership. We'd be better off if we were closer to our friends and others around us. We'd be MUCH better off if we were really tight with one another in church - no divisions, no discord, disconnections, Why can't we get that close to the people in our lives?

Here's an uncomfortable truth. One reason is there are some things that you don't like in other people because they are also true about you, in some way, and you don't like it in yourself. Yes other people are imperfect sinners, but you know all too well that you are imperfect too and don't like dealing with that. When people get close to you, they can see you, warts and all. The closer people get the more they see your blemishes, mistakes, faults, failures, weaknesses.

So we keep people at a distance because we fear closeness will expose the uncomfortable things we know about ourselves.

Genesis 3:9-10 says, *"Then the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?' He replied, 'I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.'"* Whenever God asks a question like this it's not for God's benefit because God already knows the answer. It's for Adam's benefit so he can own up. He wants Adam to accept responsibility for the fact that he had run and was hiding.

Any transformation of any area of your life - including relationships - only happens when you own up to the fact that you aren't what you ought to be in that area. As long as you think, my marriage isn't going to get any better;

my friendships are good enough; the way I fellowship in church is fine - it's too much trouble to change or do any more; as long as you deny the need or potential for improvement, nothing much will happen and you'll live life in denial. As long as you're in denial there's no recovery, there's no transformation.

So it starts with you owning up and being honest with God and with yourself that your relationships aren't what they could be. They could be a whole lot better than they are.

Adam said, "I was afraid and I hid." Fear causes us to hide. What are you hiding from today, because of fear? What are you pretending not to know? What are you pretending isn't a problem? What are you pretending isn't a barrier in your relationships because you are afraid of facing the truth.

God doesn't want you to fake it. God wants you to face it when it comes to fear.

One of your deepest needs is to be loved. But one of your deepest fears is of being seen for what you really are. You can live with a husband or wife for fifty years and keep secrets from them because you're afraid that they would not accept that part of your life. Living with someone doesn't guarantee they know all of you because they don't.

Fear causes damage in our lives and in our relationships. When we fear too much, there are three phases we tend to go through and we see all of them here.

Phase 1 is Shame - Once they disobeyed God shame entered the picture. When you disobey God, shame enters your relationship. It says, "*...they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness.*" Fear and shame go together. When you feel shame you're easily embarrassed. People feeling shame will do almost anything to avoid that embarrassment.

Shame makes us more self conscious; more nervous; more apprehensive about being humiliated. I'm going to avoid that. If you feel that way it means there's something wrong you haven't given God to take away in your life.

Phase 2 is Concealment - The cover up. When we feel ashamed we try to conceal who we really are. Verse 7 says "*So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.*" Today we all have more sophisticated ways of covering up who we are. We don't use fig leaves but we do cover up our fears and insecurities?

Some people use humor. They're the class clown but they don't let anybody get close to them. Others try to cover up insecurities by presenting an image that they're all put together - the right clothes, the right accessories, the right hair, the right car. They say the right things, use the right words about the right things, have the popular opinions.

As much as you try, none of us have it all together in any sense of the word. But we try to present this image. Why? Because of our fear of rejection, loss, personal exposure.

Today a lot of people hide behind an image. If you read their Facebook feed life is great. If you look at Instagram they have nothing but fun! They're so cool. But they don't have a perfect life! Stop faking it - it's just revealing fears in your life.

Phase 3: Distance from God - That's verse 8. "*...they hid from the Lord God among the trees.*" Most people hide. They're afraid to reveal many things about who they really are because they feel like others may not like who they are and if they shared who they really are rather than who they portray themselves to be and others didn't accept them, they'd be up the creek without a paddle.

In Genesis they hid from God because they were afraid. Fear caused us to be disconnected from God and that's why we have a relationship problem with God. We fear God out of shame. The thing is, God doesn't expect you to be perfect but he does expect you to be honest.

The next fear we see in Genesis is a fear of disapproval and, **2. My Fear of Disapproval Makes Me Defensive.** It becomes more than simply hiding and covering up. It eventually turns into being defensive and hitting back. We're not just excusing ourselves; we're accusing others. When we have this fear of disapproval, we start pointing fingers at others. You hear people say, But you did that. You did this but you did that. That's moving from excusing to accusing.

The more critical a person is the more you know they fear disapproval. The more perfectionistic, the more they critique someone else, the more you know that person is caught up in this fear of disapproval. That's just the way it shows up. The more I fear disapproval in my life the more I'm going to point at other people and all of what they're doing wrong.

So you see these commentators and preachers and other people always pointing out the wrongs of everyone else. They are afraid of being disapproved of themselves. It can be reactive - "you're bad too" - or it can be sort of

a preemptive strike to keep people from getting around to their own problems. We've seen this sort of thing a lot in this election.

Verse 11 and 12 says, *"Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?" The man replied, 'It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it.'*" Adam took it like a man – he blamed someone else.

But notice that he's not even blaming his wife - he's blaming God. *"It was the woman you gave me."* If you hadn't made this woman, I'd be fine. So he's not only blaming his wife, he's blaming God. He's passing off the responsibility.

His wife wasn't any more willing to accept responsibility. Verse 13 says, *"The serpent deceived me,' she replied. 'That's why I ate it.'"* So everyone is blaming someone else. Fear of disapproval makes us defensive.

This happens in your relationships all the time. If someone says anything to you that you feel has a hint of disapproval, you get defensive. And our reaction generally is to either explain it away, or excuse it, or accuse back or attack back.

But there's a third fear here. It's the fear of losing control and, **3. My Fear of Losing Control Makes Me Demanding.** The result of sin was that they lost control. They lost control of their future. They lost control of their destiny. Now they felt feeling totally out of control because they **were**. And the more out of control you feel the more controlling you become. The more insecure you are the greater you have the need to get your way, to make demands, to act self-protectively, or to be dominating the situation.

If you're a secure person you don't need to have your way all the time. It doesn't bother you. You don't have to have your way all the time because you're secure. But if you're insecure then you have to have your way. And you fight for your way and push for your way and you manipulate to have your way. The more out of control you feel the more controlling you become.

In verse 16 God says to the woman, *"...you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you."*

Both of them will want to control the situation which results in confusion, conflict, jockeying for power and position, all the bargaining and wheedling about who's going to be in control of this and who's going to run this. It's not a whole lot of fun to be in that situation in a relationship. Where you're not cooperating but competing with each other.

So what is the antidote that transforms a relationship that relieves these three fears? The fear of exposure and the fear of disapproval and the fear of losing control that causes me to be distant and defensive and demanding in relationships?

There's only one antidote to the fears. It is love. Learn to live in God's love. That is the antidote to these fears. I must learn to live in God's love. 1 John 4:18 says, *"...love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love."* Circle that – no fear. So you want to get rid of fear in a relationship? You've got to get God's love there. You want to get rid of fear in your career? Get God's love there. You want to get fear out of whatever you're doing? You've got to get God's love there. Wherever God's love is there is no fear. Why? *"...because perfect love expels all fear."*

The opposite of fear is not faith. The opposite of fear is love. When you let God's love into your heart through the front door, fear goes out the backdoor. Because fear and love can't live in the same house. Whenever you are afraid you are not being loving. Because perfect love expels **all** fear.

People will stand fearfully watching a fire burning a building down, but if one of them is a parent and their child is inside they may run in to get the child. Why? Because fear is overcome by love. Love is greater than the fear. So we need to learn to live in God's love.

But remember 1 John 4:18 also says, *"If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment..."* What is the fear of punishment? It's the fear of negative consequences. How many times have you been afraid to tell the truth because of the consequences? How many times have you been afraid to be yourself because of the consequences? How many times have you not wanted to say what you really believe because of the fear of the consequences – the punishment you'd receive. It is the thought of punishment or negative consequences that makes a person fearful.

So how do I learn to live in God's love? You make three daily choices. If we do these three things we will transform our relationships.

1. Every Day I Surrender My Heart to God. Every single day. When you wake up, sit on the side of your bed and say, "God before I even start this day I surrender the center of myself and all of my thoughts and emotions to you. God, I want you to be Lord of my mind and my emotions. My head and my heart. I surrender to you - fill me with your love."

God is love! The closer you get to God the more love will fill your heart. The further away you get from God the more fear will fill your heart. So if you want to get rid of your fears you've got to get close to God. If you get away from God fear, anxiety, worry, insecurity – those are going to grow in your life. But perfect love expels all fear. So if I get close to God it casts out the worry, insecurity and anxiety I live with.

In Joel 2:12-13 *"...the Lord says, 'Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts... Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead.' Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He is eager to relent and not punish."*

Surrender your heart to God. God, I give you my emotions, I give you my heart. I do it every day. Turn to God in prayer. Talk with God in prayer. Give up your sins. That's confession. You say, God that was wrong. That attitude was wrong. I shouldn't have done that.

Second, **2. Every Day I Remember the Way God Loves Me.** You have to pause each day and remember the way God loves you. Because if you don't feel loved by God you're not going to offer love to many others. If you don't feel loved you won't be all that loving. So I have to remind myself every day what God thinks about me. Not what the world thinks or even what I think, but what God thinks about me. Here are four things to know about what God thinks about you:

First: **I'm completely accepted.** That's important because the deepest wounds of your life are often those caused by rejection. We spend a lot of our lives trying to earn acceptance and avoid rejection from our parents and peers, from those we respect and those we envy, from those we know best, even from total strangers. We want respect. We want to be accepted. We don't want to be rejected

There is a myth many believe at some level that if they could just be good enough then everyone would like them. But think about it: Jesus was perfect and a lot of people didn't like him. No matter who you are or what you do someone's not going to like it - often many people.

The bad news is you're not going to get all the approval or affirmation you'd like. The good news is, you don't need it to be happy. The issue of acceptance has already been settled by God. Titus 3:7 says, *"Jesus treated us much better than we deserve. He made us acceptable to God and gave us the hope of eternal life."* Jesus – what he did on the cross – made us acceptable to God. If God likes me, even if you don't like me, I'm acceptable.

Second: **I'm unconditionally loved.** God loves you unconditionally. There are a lot of things I can say about God's love but two of the major characteristics of God's love are God's love is consistent and it's unconditional. It's consistent - God is not fickle or unpredictable.

And God's love is unconditional. God doesn't say I love you if. He doesn't say I love you because. He says I love you *period!* You can't make God stop loving you. God will never love you more than this moment and God will never love you less than this moment. Isaiah 54:10 says *"...the mountains may move and the hills disappear, but even then my faithful love for you will remain."* You never need to ask, Does God love me today? No one will ever love you more.

The third thing is, **I'm totally forgiven.** God knows the worst things you've ever done and all the things you're capable of and God still chooses to love and forgive you. God knows things that you don't even know yourself. And God still chooses to love and forgive you. So why are you holding onto shame when you're totally forgiven. Romans 8:1 says, *"...now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus."* Sins are wiped out. Because of what Jesus did for you, dying for your sins on the cross, You're totally forgiven.

Then fourth, **I'm considered extremely valuable.** God considers me valuable. How much do you think you're worth? I'm not talking about your net worth – I'm talking about your self-worth. I'm talking about your own personal value. How much do you think you are worth as a person?

Well, what is it that makes something valuable? There are two things that create value. Who owns it and what someone's willing to pay for it. How much is your house worth? Your house is worth what anybody is willing to pay for it. And would you agree that at auction, a toothbrush once owned by John Lennon would be more valuable than a toothbrush once owned by Rob Stippich? Yeah. A bed slept in by a president would be more valuable than a bed you slept in. The owner adds value to common things.

Who do you belong to? You're a child of God. Who owns you? God does. 1 Corinthians 6:20 says about you: *"...God bought you with a high price."* Value depends on ownership and on what somebody's willing to pay for it. Jesus Christ paid for you with his life. That's how valuable you are.

So, every day I surrender my heart to God, every day I remember the way God loves me and, **3. Every Day I Offer that Same Love to Others.** The same love that God gives to me, I am to offer to everyone else that I come in contact with.

Jesus said in John 13:34, *"...I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other."* He doesn't say this is an option, suggestion, or a good practice - he says it's a commandment. If you're a believer you must love, whether you like the person or not, in the same way that Christ loves you. So how did we just now say God loves you? What does that mean you MUST do if you are a believer? You are to accept them completely you're to love them unconditionally, you're to forgive them totally and you're to consider them extremely valuable. Jesus said you are to love in the same way that he loves you.

Romans 15:7 says, *"...accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory."* It means I must accept and love everyone the way Jesus accepts and loves me. I must forgive the way Jesus forgives me. I must value people the way Jesus values me.

The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 13:7 *"Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance."* This is what real love is. This is how God loves you. That means love extends grace. You offer grace to people. Love expresses faith. It never stops believing in people. Love expects the best. It never stops hoping. And love endures the worst. It never gives up. You can throw everything at me but I'm going to keep loving you. Love endures the worst.

We all needed this message today and let me say this directly - God has spoken to you and if you're honest with yourself, you know it. If you want to transform your relationships then I invite you to follow me in a prayer.