

## Special Section: Your Fears: Cutting Them Down To Size

### Afraid To Love

**Why is it so terrifying to offer ourselves to others as we really are?**

By Brent Curtis

In his short story “The Beast in the Jungle,” Henry James recounts the relationship of a woman and a man over several decades. She is obviously in love and totally devoted to him. He loves her but is wracked with feelings of anxiety and doubt over what love and commitment require. As he endlessly wrestles with these vague fears, the beauty of her youth fades along with her hope. Yet she remains, for the most part, tender and caring toward him, even as it dawns on her that there will never be a marriage.

At her death, we feel that perhaps the man will finally realize what he has lost. Instead he is filled with anger at his loved one’s “selfishness” in deserting him. He feels that the woman’s abandonment of him proves that all his fears were justified. We leave the story feeling that the real Beast in the Jungle—the fear of love, which cost him the relationship that could have been—lies yet unrecognized and waiting to pounce on him.

In his story, James has stunningly portrayed the beauty of real love, the awfulness of its absence, and the courage required to love at all. What is it that makes love such a fearful commitment? What is love, anyhow?

#### REAL LOVE

1 John 4:7–10 has this to say:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for *love comes from God*. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

In these few sentences, love is defined in a way that helps us begin to see both its beauty and its vulnerability. God’s perfect act of love is in *giving us who He* was in the Person of Jesus *in order that we might live. This without needing anything at all from us in return*—desiring our love in response, yes, but needing nothing. This is the beauty of love.

As we look at how Jesus was received by those around Him, we find that many, for their own reasons, wanted Him to be something He was not: apolitical leader, a general who would overthrow Rome, a member of the Sanhedrin, a clairvoyant. Even Jesus’ own followers often tried to get Him to be someone who enhanced their own position or security.

His response was to use the Scriptures to remind them of who He was. Jesus knew that the

life He had to give came out of obedience to who He was and not what others needed Him to be. Only *in offering who He was* did He have anything to give them.

In the Garden of Gethsemane He felt the awful rejection and conflict that lay ahead of Him if He insisted on following this path. Even the disciples, not understanding or not wanting to suffer with Him, left Him alone. Yet He did not turn away. It's as if Jesus were saying by His life, "I give who I am and what I know I have to offer and leave the results in the Father's hands."

Living like this requires vulnerability and risk. It led Jesus to the Cross. One who lives like this truly forsakes much short-term comfort and reward and places his wellbeing, his very life, in his Father's hands.

If we define love in this way it becomes much easier to see why so many of us desire love but so few of us are ready to give or receive it. There is a chasm between ourselves and loving that is filled with fear—a fear so deep and terrifying that it turns us aside to find life in other directions. Label those other directions power, greed, lust, religion, cynicism, indifference, codependence, or hedonism; they are all roads that detour around the depth and loneliness of that chasm.

Further on in his epistle, John says a strange thing about love. He writes, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear; because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18). How do we get to the place John is describing—where there is no fear in love?

## THE FEAR IN LOVE

We all face the fearful dilemma of needing to love and be loved. It is what we were made for. Yet so few seem to want what it is that we really have to offer: in a word, ourselves.

Two realities become evident to us all as we grow up. One is that it is extremely painful and risky to hope that someone just wants us without needing us for something. Second, we learn that by keeping our radar tuned we can fulfill at least one of those roles that others do seem to want. The painful memories of being unwanted at deep levels by so many of those we most hoped would love us keep us distant, hiding behind a thousand masks.

It is in the simple offering of who we are that we offer others life, and it is here where we are ultimately so afraid. And there are certain very real things to be afraid of in this offering of ourselves.

**Fleeing Fear by Performing.** The first is that we simply won't be wanted outside of some useful role we fill for others. One of a woman's greatest fears, for example, is that she'll just be used as a sex object. She will often respond to her husband's initiation at making love by "going through with it," even when certain things may be troubling her about their relationship. She will simply give her body and keep her soul a thousand miles away.

She does this because it is "safer" than talking with him about her feelings. That might mean finding out that what she most fears is true: If she presumes to offer herself as a whole woman, her husband will say, "Forget it" and turn over and go to sleep.

The man, on the other hand, takes his wife's halfhearted efforts at lovemaking as a personal rejection of who he is. He feels inadequate and foolish for even wanting her and angrily determines that he won't ask again. "It doesn't feel good to be a man around my wife," is a sentence that begins to take root in him. The next few days will be full of his angry and wounded silence.

His withdrawal confirms the wife's fears that she is basically uncared about outside of her "useful roles," and so a cycle begins. Each looks to the other to affirm their security and adequacy as a woman and a man. Whereas God's plan was that their union be the relationship

where the man and woman feel most invited to be who they are, their marriage ironically becomes an assault on each other's identity.

**Fleeing Fear by Manipulating.** A second fear in simply offering another who we are is that if we don't give our spouse, or friend, or child constant "adjustments" by manipulating them, they'll never be what we need them to be. Consider a few examples: the Christian wife who leaves helpful Christian books and tapes around where her unbelieving husband can find them; the husband who critiques his wife's behavior on the way home from each social gathering because he is afraid that her reserved nature will cause other couples not to want a relationship with them; the parent whose own giftedness was never nurtured or realized and who determines to live through her equally gifted child by rigidly charting the exact course the child's life will take.

**Fleeing Fear by Controlling.** Ironically, fear can even make it difficult for us to receive love. The words of a friend who is beginning to realize some freedom in her marriage illustrated this to me recently. She had grown up in a home where she was "loved" because she was such a good caretaker. She helped Mom with all the household chores and younger brothers and sisters and bolstered Mom's often anxious emotional state. In short, her usefulness held the family together in many ways.

My friend began to realize that her need to be needed was one of the main reasons she had married. She described feeling both freedom and terror as she began offering herself to her husband separately from these roles. The terror came because offering only herself, with no strings attached, left her feeling out of control. She had no guarantee that he would want her outside of her usefulness to him.

How graphically this describes our fear in even allowing others to love us! And how clearly this helps us to understand our rejection of the Cross. Accepting love that we have not "earned" makes us profoundly uncomfortable. If we could put all we have been saying in the examples above into a few deep soul sentences, they might go something like this: *Life comes from other people. Therefore, I will not be vulnerable to anyone who can destroy me by rejecting me (and this is anyone I'm in relationship with) or who insists on loving me without my earning it. I will not be out of control. Autonomy is the only answer to living in a fallen world.*

## LIVING IN FEAR

Living by this credo brings alive other deep and very real fears. There is the increasing anxiety of being "found out." We fear that sooner or later someone will pull the mask off of our charade, and we will suffer the deep rejection we have been trying so hard to avoid. Everyone becomes a potential enemy. We become exhausted trying to appease them all. Our lives become increasingly restricted to the narrow hallways of diverse obsessions and rituals, whether those be cleaning house, ordering our desks, doing Bible study, or watching television night after night. Such rituals protect us from the arrows of the unknown.

And then there is the vague but constant fear resulting from guilt. Guilt because we have neither accepted reconciliation with our Father through His free love in the Cross, nor have we lived up to even our own system of the law: our expectations of ourselves. Guilt because in our exhaustion and emptiness we have turned to an affair, or pornography and alcohol, or Christian seminars to provide momentary relief from those lifeless hallways. We know that we are guilty.

Satan uses this guilt in us as landing pads for fearful thoughts that seem to come out of nowhere. We can be driving along, thinking of nothing but the beauty of the countryside, when fearful thoughts strike us—and then proceed to eat away at us for days. This kind of spiritual warfare is conducted against us even when our consciences are clear; when we are full of guilt, a

spiritual “stronghold of fear” develops that causes us to retreat further and protect ourselves.

## **BEGINNING TO SLAY THE BEAST**

If all of us live in such fear at some level, then how do we get more love into the world? The answer is perhaps found in an unexpected direction—that of repentance.

To properly understand what repentance means we must first have a biblical understanding of sin. Sin is more than just a behavior or thought that does not line up with the law. Sin, according to the Scriptures, is denying our dependency on God for life and turning to walk in a direction where we ourselves have taken responsibility for finding life separately from Him (Isaiah 53:6; Jeremiah 2:13; Romans 1:21–22).

Repentance, then, requires admitting that the whole natural direction of my life is away from God. And sanctification is a process in which God gradually reveals to me—in an atmosphere of total acceptance as His beloved son or daughter—all the ways I am looking for life outside of Him (Jeremiah 2:13). Repentance means agreeing with God and turning around to begin living in a way in which I am more fully acknowledging my dependency on Him. Repentance changes the soul sentences of life to, *Life comes from God. Therefore, I can afford to be vulnerable, even to those who are not out for my best. I can rest in the love of those who are for me without trying to earn their love. Since God is in control, perhaps I can face the beast, whatever it is, and take the very real risk to love.*

I saw a need for such repentance in my own life recently. I became aware of how much pressure I felt as a counselor to “fix” some of my clients. As they refused to be “fixed,” I experienced rising anxiety and guilt inside. I then realized that I was depending on my counseling ability to provide security and life in some very tangible ways. Acknowledging to God at that point that I really have no guarantees outside of Him felt truly freeing—which is exactly how repentance *should* feel.

Repentance, rather than requiring that safety in loving come from the one being loved, means facing the fact that it is risky to love. Loving does not mean that the other will immediately or perhaps ever respond. It only means that the other will be invited to be who he really is—to be alive. It means becoming confident that deep inside of every person is the damaged yet present “image” of God that was created for healthy, dependent relationship with Him and with others. Yet, it also means recognizing that others have their own “beasts,” and there is no guarantee they will choose life.

Perhaps the Scriptures are saying something very centrally true about life and relationship when they say there is a way to live that feels like death (sometimes), but the end of living that way is life (and relationship and community and the outflow of evangelism). Perhaps our safety and our life really *are* in God—on this earth as well as in Heaven.

Lest the word *repentance* bring about an image of an angry and distant earthly father, let me offer an image of the heart of Jesus. In Matthew 23:37, we find Him crying out to the crowds of the lost, so aware of all that goes on in the hearts of people. Aware of their pain and fear. Aware that they will not allow Him to be their father, their mother—their Savior. Out of this heart He cries out, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have *longed* to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”

It is this heart of our Savior that offers us safe haven. Only by turning toward His invitation and beginning the journey of trust in Him will we find the courage to begin loving others—to face the Beast in the Jungle. It is in Him that we will begin walking out of the jungle of a

thousand fears with a new sense of who we really are.

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: Taming The Beast*

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On Your Own  
**Taming The Beast**

1. Describe a time when you tried to be what others wanted you to be in order to gain acceptance. How did it make you feel about yourself? About those you were trying to please? Did you enjoy the resulting relationships?

Were you trying to be what others wanted for their sake, or for yours?

2. Offering yourself as you are allows you to love others more genuinely and makes it possible for you to be loved more deeply in return. It also means risking deeper rejection, as Jesus did. How can you endure this kind of suffering? (1 Peter 4:13–14; 1 Peter 5:10)

3. Consider the following people in your life. Are there any you wish you could change so that they could better meet your needs?

- spouse
- close friends
- coworkers
- children
- siblings or parents
- pastor or church leader
- other \_\_\_\_\_

What does Romans 15:7 say about how we are to relate to one another?

How did Christ accept you? (Romans 5:8)

4. In Jeremiah 2:13, God accuses Israel of two sins: “They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” On a separate piece of paper,