

A FEAR OF MEN

"If I told anyone how I really felt, I'm afraid they wouldn't like me". This was a surprising comment to hear from the woman sitting in front of me. To all of her acquaintances she was known as a friendly, gracious and delightful person. But she had a problem - no one felt especially close to her. Everyone enjoyed her presence, but none claimed her as a "best friend". She came to see me because of loneliness and an empty feeling that had deteriorated into depression.

Once the door had been closed behind her and she was in the safety of my soundproof office, she acknowledged that she was bitter toward her mother. Not to mention jealous of her husband's use of time, worried sick about her children, and put out with thoughtless friends who regularly imposed on her kindness.

Contrary to first impressions, this woman's sweetness and charm were not heartfelt expressions of love, but manipulative barricades designed to protect her from hurt. She was not involved at all with people in giving, vulnerable relationships. She had placed herself in an isolated castle, sealed off from the world by an uncrossable moat of fear-motivated graciousness that kept people at a comfortable distance.

The great majority of us are no different than the woman I have described. We are all afraid - afraid of rejection. The fear, however, is often disguised in a myriad of subtle and not so subtle, protective strategies: jokes, silliness, a cocky attitude, boasting, withdrawal, sociability, a critical spirit, dogmatism, superficiality, busyness, talkativeness, and the like, etc. Fear-inspired ingenuity is capable of thinking up an endless variety of protective means that enable us to greet the real world with our real selves safely hidden from sight. Our goal, whether conscious or unconscious, becomes to avoid exposure, to appear acceptable and to deal from a position of strength rather than vulnerability. In a word, it is self-protection.

The obvious problem with this relational style is that it is sinful - it is selfish. It does not lead to Biblical fellowship and ministry but to self-absorption. It is interesting to note how very different fear and love are. Fear causes us to move away toward others. Fear is self-protecting but love is self-giving. Fear hides and covers up but love is open and vulnerable. The two are mutually opposed, but God's Word tells us that love is stronger because it is able to "cast out" fear (1 John 4:18).

How, then, can you and I practically apply this truth in our relationships with others? By simply declaring ourselves, by an act of our will, to be willing to lose all human relationship (approval, recognition, love, etc.) if obedience to God requires it. Said in another way, to love a person, I must be willing to lose my relationship with him; I must be willing to hurt (greatly or minimally) and to suffer loss (be it everything or just a few moments of social ease). Only when I resolve to endure whatever happens will the fear lose its power. And as I move toward another, I move in the realization that, in Christ I have a relationship sufficient to sustain me even if all others fail.

As I contemplate talking to a nervous visitor who has just walked through the front door of our church, I must grab hold of my initial thought and control them. I must think, "Yes, if I approach him, there might be a moment of social awkwardness. He might even react badly and walk away. I certainly would be more comfortable if I avoided him, but

comfort is not my goal. God's will is. I want to be an instrument of His love. And, if I do reach out to this person, not only will I be obedient to God and likely help this person, but my relationship with God will deepen. That's worth whatever the cost. Fear or no fear, I'm going to touch that person's life!"

Dear brothers and sisters on Christ, it is just as Christ said. We will find our life only in losing it. Our fear of others will diminish only as our loving service to them increases.

May God give you His great grace as you attempt to walk in His truth. God bless you!