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Perfect Love and the Exorcism of Fear

Richard Beck

1 John 4.18 famously declares, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” What is the nature of this fear and how, exactly, does this fear undermine our ability to love? As a psychologist approaching this question I’ve been intrigued by the description found in Hebrews 2.14–15: “Since the children have flesh and blood, [Christ Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

What is striking about this text is how it describes “the power of the devil” as being a lifelong “slavery” to the “fear of death.” But what might that mean? How are we slaves to the fear of death? How does this slavery become the power of the devil in our lives? And perhaps most crucially, how can perfect love emancipate us from this slavery?

Slavery to the Fear of Death: A Mindset of Scarcity

When psychologists analyze our fear of death a distinction is often made between *basic* and *neurotic* anxiety. Basic anxiety is the anxiety associated with biological survival, the anxiety that monitors physical threats and watches over the resources we need to take care of our loved ones and ourselves. By contrast, neurotic anxiety is social in nature, characterized by the worries, fears, and apprehensions associated with our self-concept, especially how we compare ourselves to others. Feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, envy, jealousy, rivalry, competitiveness, self-consciousness, guilt, and shame are all examples of neurotic anxiety.

But how are basic and neurotic anxieties manifestations of our fear of death? The answer is that both anxieties are triggered by perceptions of *scarcity*. The relationship between fear and scarcity has been nicely described by Brené Brown as the “never enough” problem. Brown here describes our experience of scarcity and the attendant anxieties:

We get scarcity because we live it. . . . Scarcity is the “never enough” problem. . . . Scarcity thrives in a culture where everyone is hyperaware of lack. Everything from safety and love to money and resources feels restricted or lacking. We spend inordinate amounts of time calculating how much we have, want, and don’t have, and how much everyone else has, needs, and wants.¹

Many of the worries described here by Brown trigger basic anxiety, worries about safety and meeting basic material needs. But our experience of scarcity is also neurotic in nature. As Brown notes, our struggle in a culture of scarcity isn’t just about material needs but also about “the shame-based fear of being ordinary.”² The neurotic aspect of the never enough problem triggers feelings of not being good enough, perfect enough,

1. Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2012), 22.

2. *Ibid.*

thin enough, powerful enough, successful enough, or smart enough. In short, we experience scarcity—the never enough problem—in two different ways: We worry about *having enough* (basic anxiety) and about *being enough* (neurotic anxiety).

Fear as the Power of the Devil

But how do our fears about having enough or being enough affect our ability to love? How do these scarcity-based fears become the power of the devil in our lives?

I think Brené Brown continues to be helpful here. In describing the moral impact of scarcity upon us, Brown shares this assessment from Lynne Twist:

For me, and for many of us, our first waking thought of the day is “I didn’t get enough sleep.” The next one is “I don’t have enough time.” Whether true or not, that thought of *not enough* occurs to us automatically before we even think to question or examine it. We spend most of the hours and the days of our lives hearing, explaining, complaining, or worrying about what we don’t have enough of. . . . Before we even sit up in bed, before our feet touch the floor, we’re already inadequate, already behind, already losing, already lacking something. And by the time we go to bed at night, our minds are racing with a litany of what we didn’t get, or didn’t get done, that day. We go to sleep burdened by those thoughts and wake up to that reverie of lack. . . . This internal condition of scarcity, this mind-set of scarcity, lives at the very heart of our jealousies, our greed, our prejudice, and our arguments with life.³

A “reverie of lack” sits behind our greed, selfishness, jealousies, and insecurities, making it difficult for us to emulate the love of Jesus in our lives.

Consider the way neurotic anxiety interferes with our ability to “take on the form of a servant.” Our neurotic worries about being enough tempt us to become “the greatest” in the eyes of others. We want to stand out from the crowd. We want to be noticed. We want to be praised. Consequently, Jesus’s demands for us to take the lowest place and to become a servant crash into our neurotic pursuit of self-esteem and social significance. If you fear not being enough, it is very hard to stand in a social location where you will be overlooked, ignored, and marginalized. In the words of Henri Nouwen, the *downward mobility* of Jesus goes against the flow of the neurotic pursuit of *upward mobility*, the impulse toward self-aggrandizement that characterizes our culture. According to Nouwen, our neurotic pursuit of upward mobility presents us with three great temptations: “Three temptations by which we are confronted again and again are the temptation to be relevant, the temptation to be spectacular, and the temptation to be powerful.”⁴

These are the sorts of things we pursue—being spectacular, relevant, or powerful—in order to deal with our fear and shame of not being enough. And this neurotic striving to be the greatest pulls us away from cruciform way of Jesus. We resist taking on the form of a servant because of the “shame-based fear of being ordinary.” In all this we see how fear—the neurotic fear that tells us we must be spectacular, powerful, and relevant—undermines our ability to imitate Jesus.

Beyond these neurotic anxieties basic anxiety also interferes with our ability to love. Jesus died to give life to others. We are called to follow in the footsteps of that sacrifice. As 1 John 3.16 says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” In the face of that call for sacrificial love—laying down our lives for others—our worries about self-care and self-preservation kick in.

Of course our fears here can race to martyrological extremes. But basic anxieties can accompany even the smallest acts of sharing. Consider the full context of 1 John 3.16–18: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If

3. Ibid., 25.

4. Henri H. Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 48–49.

anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

Note how laying down your life for others in this text is not connected to something heroic, dying a martyr’s death. Jesus’s death is connected here with something more mundane and workaday: sharing material possessions. And yet, while sharing seems like a relatively small and easy thing to do, the basic anxieties here can be acute. When you fully step into a lifestyle where you share your possessions with those in need you quickly encounter the basic anxieties associated with self-preservation and self-care. Just how much should I give and share to house the homeless and feed the hungry? I can always give a bit more, sacrifice a bit more. But where, if ever, will this sharing stop? Where do I draw the line? Because if I don’t draw a line, won’t I become used up and depleted? Won’t all my time, money, and energy be lost and expended?

In all this we see, in addition to the neurotic anxieties described above, how basic anxieties—our worries about being used up and depleted—affect our ability to love sacrificially. All in all, then, we’ve come to see how neurotic and basic anxieties rooted in an experience of scarcity—our fears of having enough or being enough—create a “slavery to the fear of death” that becomes the “power of the devil” in our lives. Fear undermines our ability to love.

Doxological Gratitude and the Exorcism of Fear

So how can perfect love come to cast out these fears? A key aspect, it would seem, if we are to attack these fears at the deepest level, would involve replacing the experience of scarcity with an experience of gift, gratitude, joy, and abundance. The exorcism of fear would be rooted in practices that cultivate what David Kelsey has called *doxological gratitude*.⁵

Let’s start with gratitude.

Psychologists have shown that gratitude is one of the strongest predictors of happiness.⁶ And why is that? Because to feel *grateful* is to experience life as a *gift*, as an experience of grace and joy. Thus the practices of gratitude—the cultivation of the experience of receiving a gift—replace scarcity with an experience of abundance. When life is experienced as a gift, our anxieties lessen and the capacity to share freely and spontaneously is increased. Instead of anxiously hoarding, comparing, and competing, the experience of gratitude opens our heart and our hands. Gratitude is the experience that, in Christ, I *have* and *am* “enough.” With gratitude at the center of my being, I begin to operate out of a sense of abundance rather than scarcity, acting out of joy rather than fear.

Further, doxological gratitude is distinguished from being a merely psychological phenomenon in that it is rooted in the experience of worship. The importance of doxology here connects back to and addresses how both basic and neurotic anxieties undermine our ability to love. Doxology addresses each anxiety in unique ways.

Again, basic anxiety surfaces when I’m called upon to share what is “mine” with others. Fearing these losses we become selfish and stingy. But in worship we come to experience everything we own and possess as gifts from a God who gives generously and abundantly. In worship, as we open our hands to receive from God, our sense of ownership and proprietorship attenuate. Before God we own nothing and receive everything as a gift. Doxology loosens our grip on stuff, allowing us to let go of material possessions in acts of generosity and sharing. Doxological gratitude allows us to shift, in the words of Jesus, from laying up treasures on earth to laying up treasures in heaven where nothing can be lost, depleted, or damaged. In doxology our identities are disentangled from material possessions and transferred to a location where “death has no dominion.” Thus does doxology—rooting one’s identity in Christ rather than in the world—create the psychological capacity for material generosity.

Doxology also affects our neurotic pursuit of self-esteem, social standing, and significance—the game of trying to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful in the eyes of the world. Specifically, if we reject this game, if

5. David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, Vol 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 333-356.

6. R. A. Emmons & M. E. McCullough, *The Psychology of Gratitude* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 167-192.

we opt for the downward path of Jesus, how are we to face the “shame-based fear of being ordinary”? This shame makes it hard for us take on the role of a servant, hard to stand in a place where we won’t be noticed, applauded, or praised. What can sustain us in the face of this shame?

Simple thankfulness isn’t sufficient to root out the anxious core of our self-esteem projects, the way we become reliant upon our own talents, accomplishments, and abilities in our addiction to win the attention and praise of others. Consequently, we see here how gratitude must be doxological in nature so that it can, in the act of worship, expose the self-esteem project as idolatry, as a route toward self-glorification and self-justification. In this, doxological gratitude has a *prophetic* aspect. The practices of doxology call into question and dismantle the fear- and shame-based ways our culture pursues meaning, significance, value, and self-esteem.

Worship gives us the courage to go against the flow of a culture that shames us into pursuing meaning, significance, success, and self-esteem by being relevant, powerful, and spectacular. In worship we no longer strive to justify our worth and significance before the world. Rather, in worship we *receive* our identity, worth, and value as a gift from God. Shame-based efforts at *self-justification* are replaced with the experience of *grace*. We are worthy—we are enough—not because of anything we have done or can do. We are worthy—we are enough—because of the gratuitous grace and love of God. And in the face of that grace our neurotic anxieties begin to fade. Perfect love begins to cast out fear. Because we are loved we can love others in return.

We Love Because He First Loved Us.

Technical psychological and theological discussions about neurotic anxiety and doxological gratitude can seem abstract and disconnected from concrete experience. So a final reflection about courage, fear, and the practices of doxological gratitude is in order.

On Monday evenings I lead a Bible study for fifty inmates at the maximum security French Robertson Unit prison north of Abilene, Texas. Some nights at the study I can tell the men are down, depressed, discouraged, or despairing. The men in the study live in a brutal, inhumane place and some weeks are very hard weeks. So when I get a sense of this, that it has been a particularly difficult week, before I get into my prepared material I have the men pass out the songbooks so that we can sing.

It is time for doxological gratitude.

Once we start singing something starts to change. The singing gets better, louder. The mood becomes more hopeful. Spirits start to lift. Smiles start to appear. And once we start singing the men don't want to stop. They keep calling out numbers to hymns and I keep my study notes tucked away. We sing on and on, into the night. It reminds me of Paul and Silas who sang in jail after being beaten and arrested in Philippi:

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. (Acts 16.22–25)

Savagely beaten, suffering from blood loss and sitting in absolute darkness Paul and Silas must have been feeling very afraid and close to death.

And so they sang.

Why? I believe they sang for the same reason we sing in the prison. I believe they sang for the same reason the civil rights activists sang in the '50s and '60s as they faced fire hoses, police dogs, verbal abuse, physical assault, arrest, and jail. I believe they sang for the same reason we gather in our churches to sing.

We sing to give ourselves courage. We sing to receive anew the grace that found and saved us. We sing so that anxiety can give way to faith, hope and love. We sing because singing—as a practice of doxological gratitude—is the exorcism of fear.

When I first started teaching out at the prison the men didn't know a lot of the songs in the hymnbook. Week by week I've taught them new ones. The old Negro spiritual "There is a Balm in Gilead" has become one of their favorites. On dark nights when the fear is thick in the air and we are close to despair, we reach for the hymnbooks and embrace the words:

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.

There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.

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