

Be Curious, Free, and Brave-

How to Transform Your Relationship with God and Others

JADA EDWARDS

A NEW WAYLOVE TO HE YNIR NEIGHBOR

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Be Curious, Free, and Brave-How to Transform Your Relationship with God and Others

JADA EDWARDS



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Cover design by B&H Publishing Group. Author photo by Desmond Hunt (Dlores Media Group). To Conway: You are my favorite neighbor. It is a privilege to love you.

To Joah and Chloe: In His grace, God has allowed me to be your mother.You have taught me that love is the most important anchor in a relationship.You have forever changed me, and I hope you never doubt my love for you.

To One Community Church: You are an ever-evolving joy. I am deeply grateful for our journey. You are home.

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Introduction

f you've picked up this book, you're probably interested in either being loved well or loving others well—or both. More than that, you're probably curious about how this "new way" love might affect your life.

What is this new way? What does it entail? Is it realistic? Will it be worth the effort? Does it even matter to you? I'm guessing it does. Most of us believe that being a "loving" person is directly connected to be a "good" person. When people speak about us, we all want to hear that we were kind, compassionate, reliable, safe, and so many other adjectives to sum up love. You don't have to be a high-touch, deeply emotive, constantly smiling kind of person to want that said about you. There aren't many people (if any) that want to be remembered for their moodiness, self-centeredness, grudgeholding, or emotional disconnection. The real question isn't *if* you and I want to be loved or love others well. The question is *how*.

I've been on a long personal journey exploring that question, and it all started with the story I'm going to tell a few paragraphs from now. But before we jump into it, let's cover two things.

The first thing you need to know is I'm coming at this subject from a Christian perspective. I believe God is the source of love and can teach us all we need to know about it. He is the epitome of love, so to not consider Him or His Word seems unwise for such an important topic. I know many religions and cultures have varying ideas of love, but truthfully, it all starts and ends with God. Human love is informed by, and can only flow from, divine love, so considering the "divine" part of the equation matters a great deal. And in so many ways, it's exactly what makes strong and enduring human love possible. I mean, even if you aren't a spiritual person, you can at least admit that the way our world loves doesn't work out over the long term. It may make sense for a generation or two, but eventually we change and so do our values, wants, and needs. Divine love is the necessary anchor. It doesn't negate human love, but it grounds it. What if considering the spiritual angle helps us approach it in a whole new way? If this isn't your comfort zone or your norm, I challenge you to give it some meaningful consideration. You might be pleasantly surprised and hopefully forever changed.

The second thing to know is this book is not geared primarily toward romantic love or love experienced within a marriage. It can certainly apply in those realms, but I worked hard to present this work in a way that helps us be better at love in *every* kind of relationship. Relationships with our family, friends, coworkers, roommates, classmates, neighbors, church family, hairstylists, bank tellers, committee leaders, dog groomers, social media commenters, and so on. Why? Because, as I said before, it doesn't take long to look around at our society and see that we've got a love issue in almost *every* relationship. With a simple comment on a social media post, you notice someone assassinating another person's character or questioning their humanity. You witness a neighbor ready to go to battle over a poorly parked car or a joke that didn't include them. You realize your roommate is passiveaggressively leaving dishes in the sink or not honoring your space. You notice your classmate stealing your work and calling it their own.

Or maybe *you're* the one creating the difficulties and you can't seem to pinpoint why. You're sad about the fact that you keep lashing out at that same person (or unsuspecting strangers) time after time, even though you weren't planning to. You're frustrated that you can't seem to keep your mouth shut when the time comes to avoid gossip. You're wondering why you keep having the same petty fight with your spouse or your friend. You're still harboring jealousy or annoyance for that one coworker. You can't seem to heal from that betrayal.

Third thing, this is not meant to be a step-by-step guide to your relationship. It's meant to establish a foundation or philosophy which becomes the starting point. If a relationship is already toxic or feels beyond hope or even unsafe don't think new behavior will change things overnight. I am focused on new hearts and new thinking in this book. From there, I have no doubt God will guide your next step. But go to Him first. Think like Him. Chase His perspective. God will guide. Here's the thing, all these people are your neighbors in life—not just the people who live next to you. Yep, that's a lot of neighbors and a lot of love we need to be offering up, and it can be exhausting without a healthy perspective.

We've all been there and we're all growing, so I'm glad you picked up this book (or received it as a gift, or had it shoved in your hand). I want to invite you to learn with me. Join me on this journey but make it your own. I've been changed by some of the lessons I've learned along the way, and I'd love to share them with you. Don't get me wrong: I'm no superhuman. I'm so far from perfect, but I have found a new path, and that's all we can do. In the pages that follow, I will include a variety of stories, which pull from different kinds of relationships and others of which will be marriage related (like the one below). I love real-life stories because love is something we need to be expressing with every person we know, in all kinds of environments. If I do mention a marriage-related story, it isn't because this is a book focused on marriage. It's because my husband happens to be my closest "neighbor," and he is (unknowingly) teaching me how to embrace this new way to love.

All that being said, let's talk about how this whole thing started.

I was enjoying my time with God, telling Him everything that was on my heart, trying to listen to His guidance and His voice, and then it hit me. I had a thorough list of requests that

INTRODUCTION

I needed God to handle soon. I was frustrated and growing resentful at how long it was taking. This particular evening, I was reminding Him of some work that still needed to be done ... in my husband. It was in the middle of one of my most compelling arguments that I felt the Lord convicting me, essentially saying, *"Jada, you have a love problem."*

I agreed. "I know," I said. I knew I wasn't the softest, most compassionate person. This has always been a part of my life's work: cultivating deeper sympathy, attempting authentic presence with people, and bearing other's burdens at the direction of the Lord. So God got no argument from me. I heard the words, paused briefly to acknowledge them, and moved on with my "case" for that day. I was interrupted again with the same conviction from God. *"No. You don't understand. I'm not saying you have an issue with being loving. Jada, I'm saying the issue you keep bringing before me is itself a love issue.*" This was the start to a gentle jolting. (That's what God does, you know.) God showed me that my "love issue" wasn't a matter of being more loving—as it relates to behavior or expression. It was about *what* I loved most and *how* I loved, which was absolutely a matter of the heart.

As the Spirit of God started to show me my motives, I realized that in that season, I loved my idea of marriage more than God. I loved what I wanted God to do in my husband—some future version of him—more than God Himself. And I loved my self-righteousness more than God.

Now, is it wrong to pray for God to do a work in a friend or a coworker or a spouse? Is it wrong to ask God to change someone's heart? No and no. Many times those kinds of prayers are God-led. So how did I know that my prayer in this particular season *wasn't* so godly? Because my heart was growing resentful the longer it took for God to respond in the way I wanted, and **resentment is never the fruit of pure-hearted prayer**. This was a reawakening for me. This disproportionate love started to show up in several areas of my life. I started noticing it not only in my relationship with my husband but in many of my other relationships. A few weeks later the Lord brought all this revelation full circle. He took me back to the familiar but foundational passage of Mark 12:28–31 (ESV):

> And one of the scribes came up and ... asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

This left me with the overarching question, "I get this, and I want to do it. I want to love this way—the Jesus way. I want to love God and others in ways that require faith and selflessness. But I feel constrained all the time, like something is holding me back. So, how do I recognize and remove the limits that are holding me back? How can I love with my heart, soul, mind, and strength?"

My profound realization sent me on a journey to rediscover the idea of love that God demonstrates perfectly and commands us to model in our imperfection. There is much work to be done in understanding this, but the journey will be one that changes the way we see everything and everyone. I mean that. God shows us what love is supposed to look like, and when we catch His vision, it really does transform all our relationships. My journey may have started in my relationship with my husband, but loving according to God's design changes *any* kind of relationship, *all* our relationships, no exceptions. It changes the way you introduce yourself to strangers. It changes the way you engage with coworkers. It even changes the way you love your family and the friends you may have known for years. Whether the relationship is new or old, occasional or daily, professional or personal, it will be affected. It can change for the better. I'm talking about every single relationship in your life. God's transformative way of doing love is not something to fear but something that somehow fills you even as you give freely. Do you want that?

Me too. So let's start by exploring what's ahead of us in this book.

In part 1, we'll explore various limits that might be restricting your experience of receiving God's love (and giving it). We'll consider four limits that could be holding you back, and trust me: when you work to remove them, you'll not only enjoy God's deep and abiding love for you, but you'll also be able to be a vessel for that love for others in ways you never have before.

In part 2, we'll explore the natural result of experiencing God's unlimited love, which is what love looks like when it flows through you and into the lives of others. Put differently, you'll learn how to love others around you in a whole new way, a way the world doesn't expect and can't explain. A way that only God could empower. To be more specific, in a world that's disinterested, you'll be curious. In a world that locks itself in its own prison of unforgiveness and bitterness toward others, you'll be free and forgiving. In a world that is afraid and unable to feel discomfort, you'll have what it takes to be brave and uncomfortable. In a world that gives up at the first sight of difficulty in friendships, relational disputes, marriage challenges, and workplace disagreements, you'll be resilient. And in a world that is dishonest, power hungry, and often fake in its posture toward others, you'll be honest, humble, and real.

So let's learn some new things about love together—and watch our relationships transform as a result.

PART 1 What Is Limiting Your Love?

Chapter 1

LIMIT 1: Settling for the Wrong Definitions

ave you ever had someone ask you a broad, lifedefining question like, "What's your favorite food?" or "What's your favorite color?" Maybe you've been asked to share your favorite movie or concert. I am often surprised at how some people are able to give immediate answers to these questions. When I am asked those questions, my mind starts to race through all of the variables that might determine my "favorite" thing, and inevitably I end up asking more questions. This may seem unnecessary but, hey, I need clarity. When it comes to a favorite food, I may ask if they are referring to breakfast, casual dinner, or sporting-event-concession-stand food. In my book, those are important qualifiers that provide different answers. When deciding a favorite color, I want to know which season or maybe which article of clothing. My favorite color for shirts is different from my favorite color for pants or dresses. Don't even get me started on concerts and movies. Do you want to know my favorite comedy movie or my favorite action movie or maybe my favorite documentary? Do you want to know my favorite singer or favorite band or favorite overall concert experience? These kinds of questions can lead to more questions because they are so broad. There are so many ways to define a "favorite," and there are so many variables that might change what your favorite thing is depending on the environment or the season or your mood. To be answered accurately, these questions need context and detail so a person can understand how to give the most precise answer to the question.

Something similar is happening when we talk about navigating the broad idea of love. We all want to navigate it well. We all want to show up to it with good habits, enjoy love, and give love in ways that are best for ourselves and others. But there's a way love is designed to be "lived," and if we paint with too broad of a stroke or fail to understand God's context, we'll create our own definition and miss God's intention. In addition to that, we'll be limited in how much we can enjoy it. We all have ideas about love, but our ability to enjoy it hinges on whether or not we're working with the right understanding of it.

In this chapter, we're going to explore the wrong *and* the right definition of love, and the way we'll do that is to look at three overarching problems that create gaps between the way we approach love and the way God designed us to.

Problem 1-We Have Too Many Ideas about Love

To begin with, we have so many different ideas about love and so many emotions that we call love, it's almost impossible to define. To explain my point, consider words like Kleenex, Band-Aid, ChapStick, or aspirin. These are words that were once trademarked to represent specific items. But as competition entered the market, these words became synonymous with an entire genre of products. No one asks for a facial tissue; they ask for Kleenex. People don't generally ask for an adhesive bandage or lip balm. They ask for a Band-Aid or ChapStick (maybe Carmex). And who ever asks for Aleve, Advil, or Motrin. My point is that instead of meaning something specific, these words now cover a wide range of items—and none of us think twice about it.

In English, a similar thing has happened with the word *love*. It *should* mean something specific, but instead it is now used to describe a wide spectrum of sentiments that get lumped together with one word. It covers personal affection, familial love, romantic feelings, worship and devotion, compassion and concern, sexual attraction, personal appreciation, personal preference, and more. We use the word so broadly, and sometimes so loosely, that it loses its meaning. We say we love our children and our spouses. We also love our pets, our cars, our hairstyles, and favorite foods. As a matter of fact, the *way* we say it can add to the nuance. A serious "I love you" outweighs a "Love ya" any day.

Technology has added to this broadness, as it gives us further avenues to express ourselves in bite-sized ways. You can "love" a message or image sent to your device. You can "heart" a comment or post on social media platforms. But that same heart icon can mean anything from a mild approval to passionate agreement. The way we so frequently, and sometimes frivolously, express affection can oversimplify the definition of love according to God. God's love is not a watered-down, diluted expression of affection. It is a high calling and a standard measured by sacrifice and consistency, which we will further unpack later in this book.

We've talked about some general ways we have too many ideas about love, but what are some specific ways this plays out? Let's explore three briefly below:

Love = Affection Based on Someone's Performance

When we speak about love in our relationships, we are typically speaking about some level of affection or affinity that can vary depending on the behavior of the object of our affection. For example, many of us feel like we love our spouses, kids, or friends more on the days they show us intentional care, while we feel less love for them on the days they seem distant. Whether we're referring to objects, people, or events, it is always a love that requires us to be satisfied with the performance of the other party before the affection can be present.

Love = A Grandiose, Romantic Idea that Can Save Us

Sometimes we think and speak of love as a general, intangible idea instead of a call to action as God intends. Events like weddings can send us into a fantastical, idealistic world where love is some indescribable, overwhelming reality that fills us to the point where it sustains us. It's a euphoric state of being. We can unknowingly idolize love as we talk about its power, its ability to heal, stabilize, and satisfy apart from the One who established love. Boiled down, we think the idea of love can save us when it simply can not.

Love = A Transaction Based on What Someone Offers

On the other hand, as opposed to generous or allencompassing, we may merely imagine love as a transaction that is mutually beneficial in some way. We start out loving our parents because they provide for our basic needs. We build our early friendships because that friend makes us feel brave or has a talent we desire or understands our family. These relationships are based on what the other person offers

to us. But as we mature, those relationships should evolve. If relationships don't move past a transactional identity, they typically *dissolve* rather than *evolve*. Eventually, we should love our parents because they are the gift God has given us, and He has asked us to honor them in all

If relationships don't move past a transactional identity, they typically *dissolve* rather than *evolve*. their imperfections. Likewise, we should have friendships based on mutual contribution with the understanding that when one friend fails, disappoints, or ceases to offer what we want, we seek God in His wisdom rather than disconnect from the friendship.

Love is more than receiving a benefit or feeling good. Often, we think it's the result of someone or something making us happy no matter how temporary or shallow. Other times we think it's simply a transaction, or a lofty idea floating around in the air that can save us, if we could just grab ahold of it. Those are the types of "love" we are drawn to; they feel natural to us.

We are not naturally drawn to the type of love that is not reciprocated or appreciated because we are not inclined to love sacrificially. (Fear not, *sacrificial* is not a code word for abusive or toxic.) If you are a parent, uncle, aunt, guardian, or the like, you undoubtedly have experienced a taste of sacrificial love toward the children in your life. But even as we try to love our children in sacrificial ways, we usually (if we're honest) expect a connection that benefits us in some way. The benefit may be a sense of identity, affirmation, affection, or something unnamed, but it's common for parents to need something from their kids. Don't get me wrong: it's normal and good to build bonds with your children. My point is that in every relationship human love generally wants some sort of "return on its investment."

So, when it comes to this first problem—too many ideas about love—what's the solution?

Solution 1: Choosing God's Definition of Love

If the world offers so many ideas about love, how can we find the right one? If we've been defining love in all the wrong ways and this has, in turn, limited our experience of love, then what's the right definition? God tells us clearly in His Word: "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" (1 John 4:9 NIV). This is the essence of the gospel. God who has loved us since creation desires relationship with us. When our sin severed the connection we had with God, He sent a solution to restore the broken relationship between Himself and humankind. The solution was the life. work, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It wasn't easy and it wasn't cheap. And the mind-blowing truth is God did all of this out of His love for us. Not His *need* for us. Not His expectation of us. Not even His use for us. But simply, His love for us. That reality must be the backdrop to every pursuit of loving others, or we will always miss the mark.

Problem 2—We Define God's Love Based on Human Experiences

The second problem that creates gaps, or limits, between the way we love and the way God designed us to love is this: we are inclined to define love (God's love in particular) based on our human experiences. These experiences are largely set by our early childhood years. When our experiences of love are negative, this births pessimism or hopelessness and lowers our expectation for what God's love can do in our lives. Negative, traumatic experiences are almost always at the root of any unhealthy life patterns we find ourselves in as adults.

On the flip side, when our experiences are positive, we are filled with an idea of love that is sometimes overrated and romanticized in our own heads. For example, think about your own father. Whoever God sovereignly allowed to be your father has had lasting impact on you. You may have had a biological father who was amazing and loved the Lord, but I guarantee you he still fell short. Somewhere in your mind, however, he probably created the standard of what fatherly love is. On the other hand, you may have had a strained relationship with or have been abandoned by your earthly father, and that too will set a certain standard in your mind. That sort of pain will definitely leave a wound so deep it will taint the way you view love. Maybe your parents were married, but your father wasn't present. Then you would draw conclusions that could lead you to an apathetic sort of "stale" love. You could have had some combination of father figures-maybe a surrogate type of father who was a family friend, an uncle, coach, or grandfather. In any case, this relationship has shaped the way you understand love. (More on this subject in a later chapter.)

The impact of our father figures (or lack thereof) is only the beginning. Other types of relationships form our experience and expectations around what love is, many of which are group relationships—like your nuclear family. If your family celebrated success and accomplishments, it is likely that you believe God is only pleased when you have twenty consecutive days of "quiet time," serve fifteen hours a week in some volunteer role, or offer some other consistently measured "achievement." If you grew up in an environment where conflict was avoided at all costs, it probably affects how often you confess to God about mistakes you make (and it may feed your belief that "punishment" is coming after every mistake).

Or maybe it's not family for you; maybe it's an "ex" in your life story. The way that relationship ended certainly impacted your next relationship choice, right? If the relationship ended well, you probably interpreted the next relationship as a new, exciting chance at love or a "fresh start." If the relationship ended badly, you were probably skeptical of others after such deep heartbreak. And if the breakup experience with your "ex" affects the way you view the next relationship, I can guarantee it is affecting your perspective and relationship with your heavenly Father.

To get a bit more personal on how this has played out in my own life, as a young girl, I equated achievement with love. So I spent quite a bit of my adult Christian life trying to impress God. I saw Him like my dad—meaning that I mistakenly thought I could show off my good behavior and hide the sin in my heart. I figured God was keeping score on my behavior and not my heart. It took me years for this lie to be exposed. I remember being a freshman in college when it dawned on me—I hadn't tithed in several months. This was totally out of character for me. Truthfully, I was waiting on God to cause my car to break down or *do* some other thing that would generate an expense equal to what I should have been tithing. You can clearly see my lack of grace orientation. When I realized God doesn't love me based on my behavior, but somehow He loves me while knowing *everything* about me, my life changed. Although I have a new awareness of grace and the way God loves me, I am still working against my early ideas of love.

Here's another example. A friend of mine—let's call her Shawna—grew up bouncing between foster homes and ultimately aged out of a state system with no consistent sense of family. For her, love is not at all emotional or "felt." Love is provision. Love is safety. When she had a home, a bed, and food, she felt loved. As she is raising her daughter, she has had to constantly battle a tendency to perpetuate those ideas. Her daughter wants her time, wants conversations and "girl hangout days" to feel loved. Shawna thinks about her own life, in light of the current home and stability she provides for her daughter, and has a hard time understanding why her daughter doesn't feel deeply loved.

The examples are limitless with the way our experiences shape the way we define God's love. Sometimes those experiences can cause us to live in fear of abandonment and/or rejection. They can create a relationship with God that is performance based or one that is expecting God to be unreliable or unfaithful because that's all we've known. Don't get me wrong: **our experiences aren't the enemy. They are important aspects of our stories, and God certainly uses them for His glory**. It's not *wrong* that we've had the experiences we've had, and we don't need to act like they aren't real or valid to have a proper view of God. We can own the fact that we've gone through both good and bad human experiences just like the next person. **We have to be careful, however, that our** As Christians, we know we're supposed to "be loving" toward everyone. So, for all our efforts, why do we still struggle?

Why do we still avoid that coworker in passive-aggressive ways, fight yet again with our spouse over who's on dish duty, snap at our kids in key teaching moments, type that sarcastic comment online, or bicker with our neighbor over the state of our yard?

We all want to love better—to love like Jesus—so what's the hold up? Could it be that we've unintentionally followed the world's predictable definitions of love?

In these pages, author and Bible teacher Jada Edwards not only reveals the ways we get love wrong, but unveils just how much can change in our relationship with God and others when we finally get it right. In this book, you'll discover:

- Four limits holding you back from fully experiencing God's love for you
- Five clear and surprising ways to be loving to those around you
- How to be curious, free, brave, resilient, and real in your relationships
- How to experience transformation in any kind of relationship

Do you want changed relationships—with both God and others? Do you want to love better—in a new way that actually works? It's time for transformation.



JADA EDWARDS is an author, speaker, Bible teacher, and mentor. Studying and teaching the Bible to women is one of her greatest passions, along with discipleship and living on mission. While she is a lively and sought-after speaker, the local church is her home. She and her husband, Conway, planted One Community Church in Plano, Texas, where she leads a regular women's Bible study and serves as the Creative Services Director and Women's Director. Jada enjoys spending time with Conway and their two children, Joah and Chloe, particularly around the dinner table.



