

## **“Perfect Love Casts Out Fear” (An Exposition of 1 John 4:16-21)<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Introduction***

In our study through 1 John we looked at v.13-16 last Lord's day, and there we saw that John teaches us that it is by *the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit* at work in the life of every believer in Christ that we are to know that we are saved. In v.13 John tells us, **“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”**

In that passage John pointed us to at least two (2) specific things about the work of the Holy Spirit within believers by which we are to recognize the reality of His presence in our lives and so of our being born again unto salvation in Christ: **1.) *The confession of our faith in Jesus Christ***, that He is **“the Savior of the world”** and **“the Son of God”** (v.14-15); and **2.) *Our abiding in the love of God*** (v.16).

Now in v.17 the Apostle John is continuing with that same subject (*abiding in love*), and *connects the dots for us* to spell out exactly what he means to teach us by these things. It is *by abiding in the love of God* that **“this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment”** (v.17). Once again, here John is dealing with *the subject of Christian assurance*. And what is assurance essentially about, if it is not **'having confidence in the day of judgment.'**

The *opposite* of confidence or assurance is *fear*. John mentions **“fear”** no less than *four* (4) times in v.18. In some ways you could say that John is *contrasting fear with faith* (or least with *the fruits of faith*). F.F. Bruce writes: “Christian confidence and Christian love go together; they find their antithesis in shame and fear.”<sup>2</sup>

That is the essence of what John teaches us in our passage, that “Christian confidence and Christian love go together.” In v.18 John tells us that **“perfect love casts out fear,”** and so this morning we want to briefly look at what it means to have this love perfected in us that *we too* **“may have confidence for the day of judgment.”** (v.17)

### ***Perfect Love***

The *first* thing that we must come to understand rightly in our text is what John means by **“perfect love”** (v.18) or by love being **“perfected with us”** (v.17). If our assurance or **“confidence”** in the day of judgment in some ways depends upon such love being made perfect in us, then we will want to be sure that we understand exactly what this means, won't we?

Let us start by settling in our minds what John does *not* mean by this perfecting of love. He does *not* mean that we as believers can have confidence in the day of judgment only if our love for God and for the brethren is perfect and without any lack or shortcoming.

If that were the case, he would be *undermining the very point of his own letter*, which is that we as believers in Christ might have a settled and certain sense of assurance of our salvation (1 John 5:13). If we need for our love to be “perfect” in that sense, *none of us* could ever have assurance, could we?

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Nashville, TN; Bath, England: Kingsley Books, 2018), 113.

John Stott writes:

“John is not suggesting that any Christian’s love could in this life be flawlessly perfect, but rather developed and mature, set fixedly upon God.”<sup>3</sup>

The Greek word that John uses here that is translated as “**perfected**” in v.17 has the idea of something being *brought to completion* or maturity. All believers are meant to come to *maturity in the faith*, as well as in our *love* in this sense of the word.

John is *in no way* teaching a kind of salvation by works here. He is *not* saying that if we want to have no reason to fear the coming day of God’s just judgment, our love for God and neighbor must be perfect and without defect. Again, *no one* could ever have such confidence if that were the case.

So what does such perfect love look like? How do we as believers attain to such love? To see the flow and force of John’s logic we must look at v.16-17 together. There John tells us:

**“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.”**

In other words, it is by *abiding in love* that we abide in God and He in us (v.16), and it is “**by this**” (or *by means of it*) abiding in love that “**love is perfected with us**” (v.17).

And notice where it starts – *not* with *us*, but with *God*; *not* with *our* love for God and the brethren, but with *God’s* love for us in Jesus Christ! John starts by reminding us, “**So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us.**” (v.16) *Believing* in God’s love for us in Christ comes first; it is through faith that we are saved!

As always, we must *not* put the cart before the horse when it comes to our understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the way of salvation. As John goes on to tell us in v.19, “**We love [or “love him” - KJV] because he first loved us.**”

And remember that John is speaking of our love for God and for the brethren as the *evidence* of our having been saved and abiding in God, *not* as the means unto that salvation. John Calvin puts it well when he says:

“Then, God’s love to us is what is to be understood here. He says it is *perfected*, because it is abundantly poured forth and really given, that it appears to be complete. But he asserts that no others are partakers of this blessing, but those who, by being conformed to God, prove themselves to be his children. It is, then, an argument taken from what is an inseparable condition.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, John is speaking *not* of cause & effect, but “inseparable condition.” Big difference. All who know the Lord Jesus by faith *will* abide in love *because* they believe and are born again. They must go together.

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3 John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 169.

4 John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 245.

## ***Perfect Love Casts Out Fear***

The second thing that we want to look at in our text follows closely upon the first. What does John mean when he tells us that **“perfect love casts out fear”** (v.18)? As we saw earlier in the quote from F.F. Bruce, “Christian confidence and Christian love go together.” And so love and fear (or dread) are in a sense *mutually exclusive*. Likewise John Stott again writes:

“The two [i.e. fear & love] are as incompatible as oil and water. We can love and reverence God simultaneously (cf. Heb. 5:7), but we cannot approach him in love and hide from him in fear at the same time.”<sup>5</sup>

The **“fear”** that John speaks of in this passage is *not* the fear of the Lord that the Scripture so often commends to us as the hallmark of Christian piety, but rather the dread or terror that the unbeliever faces at the prospect of God's just judgment on the last day.

This is what Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 5:10-11, where he writes:

**“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are made manifest unto God; and I trust also are made manifest in your consciences.”** (KJV, italics added)

Some of you may be familiar with “Evangelism Explosion,” a program and organization founded by D. James Kennedy, who was the long-time pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church (PCA), in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The purpose of this program is to equip believers to be able to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with unbelievers.

One of the things that Evangelism Explosion has become known for is its *two diagnostic questions*. (Incidentally, if you are a member of this church you might remember being asked these same two questions as part of your membership interview!) The two questions are as follows:

1. Do you know for sure that when you die you are going to be with God in Heaven?
2. If God were to ask you, “Why should I let you into My Heaven?” what would you say?

What is your answer to these questions? The first question is in some ways about *assurance*, isn't it? It is about (to use John's words in v.17), **'having confidence for the day of judgment.'** Do *you* know for sure that when you die you will be with the Lord in heaven? I hope that you can say 'yes' to that.

And the second question is asking you for *the basis of that assurance*, isn't it? Basically, *why* (or on what basis) do you believe that when you die you will be with the Lord in heaven?

How would *you* answer that question? Would you say that you are going to heaven when you die because you are a good person? Or because you try to live a good, moral life? Or because you are religious? Or because you think all people just go to heaven when they die?

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<sup>5</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 169.

If that is the case, you will have no true peace of conscience at the thought of the day of judgment. You cannot help but have fear or terror at the prospect of that great day when the Lord Jesus comes again, in glory, to judge the living and the dead.

Only by faith in Christ, and trusting in Him alone, can you have peace with God, and have no fear at the thought of the coming judgment. For we have no righteousness of our own by which to stand before God – Isaiah 64:6 says,

**“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.”**

Not just our sins and iniquities, but **“all our *righteousnesses* are as filthy rags”** that do not cover our sins in the eyes of God! They do not enable us to stand before God in the day of judgment.

Only the cross of Christ and His perfect, spotless righteousness, accounted to us by faith alone, enable us to stand firm, and have no fear on that day. It is only through faith in Christ alone that we are justified, and have peace with God. Are *you* trusting in Christ alone for salvation from your sin?

### ***Love and Assurance***

Last but not least, what is the point that John has been driving at this whole time throughout our passage (and throughout much of this entire epistle)? It is that *love and assurance go together*. And this necessarily involves our love for the brethren. In v.19–21 he writes:

**“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”**

Love and assurance go together. *And love for God and love for the brethren also must go together*. In fact, what John is saying here in many ways is that our love for the brethren – love for our brothers and sisters in Christ – is the evidence of a true love for God!

In other words, where love for the brethren is absent, so then is love for God. John goes so far as to say that anyone who professes to love God while hating his brother in the Lord is **“a liar.”** (v.20) How can he say that? Because, as he says there, **“he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”**

Just as our Lord Jesus taught us that *loving God* with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and *loving our neighbor* as ourselves are the great commandments upon which all of Scripture hangs (Matthew 22:37-40), even so John reminds us here that Christ commands us there that **“whoever loves God must also love his brother.”**

And so if you are lacking assurance or struggling with doubt, may I ask you, *how is your love for the brethren?* Are you sincerely and fervently loving your brothers and sisters in the Lord? If our love for the brethren is *the evidence of our abiding in the love of God*; and if that is to lead to a strengthening of our assurance, then how fervently ought we to seek to grow in our love for the brethren?

If there is a clear and obvious takeaway or application (an imperative!) to our text, surely it is that! It is as John said back in 1 John 4:7, where he exhorts us:

**“Beloved, *let us love one another*, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.”**

We love because He first loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. And so let us make every effort to *walk in love*, and to *grow in our love for one another*, and as Paul says in Galatians 6:10, **“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”** - Amen