

Perfect Love

1 John 4:13-21

May 27, 2018

Perfect Love. Wow! What a sermon title. A little intimidating wouldn't you say? Let me take any pressure off that you might be feeling. This message and this text in 1 John 4 is not an expectation for any of us, to have to live up to a standard of loving perfectly. Rather, what this text wants us to embrace as Christ-followers, is that God's love for us is a perfect love. That is hard for us to understand. In fact, it's incredibly difficult because every other love around us is FAR from perfect. Some of the love around us has been disappointing; it's let us down. And, unfortunately, many of us have put our hope in loves that are insufficient, unkind, and unreliable.

We humans tend to get our hopes up. We tend to expect too much from the loving relationships around us. We tend to forget the whole sin nature thing and we set ourselves up to get hurt. Most of us have gotten burned more than once by unrequited¹ or unfulfilling love. The Bible cautions us in Proverbs 4:23, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."² The wounds on our hearts can profoundly impact the way we live; the way we treat others around us. Our ability to give and receive love can be negatively impacted by the realities of the lesser loves in this world.

Well, I have good news for all of us today. There is a love out there that is a perfect love. This perfect love, that we so desperately need, is the very love that God has for us. Not our love for Him, not our love for each other. But rather, God's perfect love for us. Turn in your Bible to 1 John 4.

Perfect love is...

1. A love we can rely on. John begins our passage this morning with a clear picture of our triune God in 1 John 4:13-14, "This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world." This loving unity of our triune God, carries out an incredible partnership in demonstrating God's perfect love for us: The Father sends, His Son saves, His Spirit indwells.

As I mentioned earlier, we tend to rely on lesser loves. Love from the people around us rather than love from God. Love from the people around us is a very good thing; it is a gift from God. God has designed human relationships to thrive in love for one another; to meet our needs for companionship, security, and fellowship. But I wonder how many of us can relate to this idea of getting trapped in a useless struggle of trying to MAKE another person to love us? It could be our unceasing efforts to be loved by our girlfriend/boyfriend or our fiancé or our spouse. It may seem that no matter what we do or how hard we try, we just can't get the love from them that we need. It never ceases to amaze me how many young women go to extremes to try to win the love of some guy who treats them badly. Someone who has no clue what it means to love a woman the way Christ loved the church. I suppose it goes both ways though. I'm sure there are also young men out there going to extremes to win some woman who treats them badly.³

Others of us may be struggling to win the love and approval of our parents or of parents trying to win the love of their children. We stretch ourselves and we push beyond healthy margins and we go to exacerbating ends. And, when it's all said and done, it only results in frustration and disappointment. The longer I am a parent, the more concerned I have become with other parents, who seem to find all of their worth and value in their kids. It's great to love our kids. We should love them and provide for them and fully support them in their aspirations. But, sometimes, parents go too

¹ One commentator notes that "Love is characterized by fear when there is a doubt it will be returned. We have no fear of this since God's love was prior to ours." Plummer, *Epistles of S. John*, p. 107, quoted in Akin, D. L. (2001). *1, 2, 3 John (Vol. 38)*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

² Note also Song of Solomon 8:6-7.

³ Google the lyrics to the song "Make It Right," by Kenny Marks.

far. Perhaps for some, it's a blatant attempt to vicariously live out the childhood they never had. Or, perhaps it's an effort to give their kids the support that these parents never received themselves from their own parents. I'm sure that there are other reasons as well. But it gets out of balance when we put any other human being in too prominent a place in our lives.

When we rely on the love of other people for our ultimate purpose and meaning in life, those people then become our idols. People shouldn't take the place of God. Because they are people, they just aren't able to meet our deepest needs. Don't put expectations on people that they simply can't fulfill. This is a recipe for relational disaster.

I was really captured this week by the phrase in 1 John 4:16, "And so we know and rely⁴ on the love God has for us." This word translated "rely" is also translated "believe" in some translations. And "believe" is a good translation. But we need to be clear here, we are not just talking about an intellectual assent, to the reality of God's love. We are talking about a very practical, "all-in," kind of dependence. We not only believe God's love to be true, but we consider it worthy of our trust."⁵ Therefore, we shouldn't stop at simply knowing God's love; we need to rely on it. Lean into God's perfect love and discover just how trustworthy it is. In an unreliable world, filled with its share of unreliable relationships, we can rely on God's perfect love! That is the only genuine and lasting source for our identity and purpose. My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, THIS is Good News! The affirmation of our worth is found in God's perfect love for us. Our core value as human beings, is found in His love alone and nowhere else. This is where we find our confidence in life.

Perfect love is...

2. A love we can have confidence in. This confidence looks ahead to a future day. 1 John 4:17 says, "This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus."⁶ When each of us stands before God, those of us who are like Jesus, can have confidence on the day of judgment. As we learn to love like Jesus loved, it gives us confidence that our faith is genuine. And a genuine faith in Jesus means that there is no condemnation waiting for us. In other words, in this world, as we participate in love like Jesus' loved, it brings us confidence. And although this confidence is regarding a future day, that's not to say this confidence doesn't impact our present-day reality. 1 John 4:18 goes on to clarify, "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." The Greek word that John uses here for "fear" (φόβος) can mean either a good fear as in "respect" or a bad fear as in "dread."⁷ Here, the context makes it clear, John is referring to the bad fear, dread. In other words, Perfect loves drives out dread and fear of punishment while at the same time maintaining a proper reverence for God. Now, there are some reasons why some of us might associate love with a dreadful fear.

1) Some of us associate love with fear, because we were disciplined in a fear-based theology. Perhaps we heard a sermon on hell and God's eternal condemnation and we were frightened into following Jesus. This is not to say the doctrine of hell is a bad thing or a wrong thing. But, it is to say that sometimes well-meaning evangelists and pastors turn up the heat a little too high. Perhaps we've been fed a steady diet of judgmental, religious, legalism and strict behaviorism. But once we are in Christ, we need not fear God. God's people have nothing to fear. We should not be living out a fear-based relationship with our Heavenly Father.⁸

⁴ "Rely" is translated from the Greek "πιστεύω," meaning "to consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one's trust" and to "believe in something, be convinced of something." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 816). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

⁵ See footnote above.

⁶ 1 John 4:17 ties in closely with 1 John 2:28.

⁷ Akin, D. L. (2001). *1, 2, 3 John* (Vol. 38, p. 186). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers. Akin goes on to say, "The word δειλία also means "fear" in the sense of dread or angst. Another word for the more positive kind of fear, i.e., respect, is εὐλάβεια, which in the NT always refers to this kind of fear of God. John uses φόβος, which can mean both. The context determines the meaning to be the negative kind of fear."

⁸ John 3:16 is an amazing verse but the verse that follows, John 3:17, is also worth noting, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." God's wrath on sin is a true and sobering thing, but His love toward people is a perfect love; a love where

God's justice demanded full payment; but Jesus made that full payment on the cross. This is why we CELEBRATE the Lord's Supper. Therefore, Christ-followers need not fear God's judgment. Those of you who have been following Christ a long time, probably already have Romans 8:1 on the tip of your tongue, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."⁹ This concept of God's perfect love is essential for us to grasp. It gives us great confidence.¹⁰ There is another reason why some of us might associate love with a dreadful fear.

2) Some of us associate love with fear, because of an earthly relationship that has been fear-based. Now, I need to admit, that this has not been my experience. But, I have many good friends who have shared with me the heart wrenching reality of just how difficult it can be for them to believe that God loves them. That God is not always angry with them; that there's no reason to fear Him. It's more natural for some of us, to cower in fear of God, than to ever consider crawling up in His lap, confident in his love. Our ability to draw near to God in full assurance of faith is being blocked, by fearfulness and the damage of past relationships. Rather than experiencing the love that should have been there with our earthly father/mother/whoever, some of us experienced hatefulness, threats, and harm. We can see why this would cause someone to associate love with fear. If you have been damaged by unhealthy relationships, if past hurts are making it difficult for you to open up to God's love, then here's something wonderful to ponder, 1 John 4:18 declares, "perfect love drives out fear." Brother and Sisters, let that sink in! Let this idea penetrate your heart and mind. Let it sweep over you and take the place of lies and past wounds and disappointments.¹¹ As we grow to understand and rely on God's perfect love, we will learn to associate it with confidence rather than fear.

As we prepare to receive communion together, consider these amazing verses from Hebrews 10:19-23, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."

Take a look at the end of 1 John 4:18, "...The one who fears is not made perfect in love." My prayer today for those of you who still live in fear of God's punishment is that His perfect love will drive that fear away. My prayer is that today you will be made perfect in love. What does it mean to be "made perfect in love?" What is John getting at here? Do we have to be perfect after all? No, that's not what he's saying. We've already talked about God's perfect love for us, but what does it mean for US to be made perfect in love? This goes back to what John just said in 1 John 4:16, "...God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them."¹²

This sounds kind of strange or mystical and that's because it is. This is a spiritual thing, something that happens through the Holy Spirit. It's what my *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* refers to as a "mutual indwelling:" God lives in Christ-followers and Christ-followers live in Him.¹³ Some translations use the word "abide."¹⁴ We abide in God and God abides in us. But, as I said, this is a spiritual thing, a supernatural thing. It's not something we can drum up or fake on our own. It's something only God can do by His Spirit. So, if we are abiding in fear, we need to ask God to make us perfect in his love. To complete in us whatever is lacking in our heart and soul, that we might fully abide in Him. We need

there is no fear. He sent Jesus to rescue us from wrath, to take the punishment in our place. Let's not miss this phrase from 1 John 4:16, "God is love" which is also mentioned earlier in 1 John 4:8, "God is love." 1 John 4:9-10 then goes on to articulate, "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."

⁹ Later on, Romans 8:15 says, "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."

¹⁰ Consider 1 John 3:19-21.

¹¹ Consider Romans 12:2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind...**"

¹² He also says it in verse 13, "we live in Him and He in us." And, in verse 15, "God lives in them and they in God." Also, 1 John 3:24 says, "The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us."

¹³ See note on 1 John 3:24, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2567.

¹⁴ See the ESV and NKJV for example. In fact, "the word "abide" (menō) occurs three times in the Greek text" for this verse alone. (Akin, D. L. (2001). 1, 2, 3 *John* (Vol. 38, p. 185). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

God to heal us from our hurts and confusion about love. Our ultimate communion with God happens through the intimate indwelling of His Holy Spirit.¹⁵

As we celebrate His perfect love, represented by this communion meal, let's invite Him to draw near to us as we draw near to Him.

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
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¹⁵ Here's an amazing thing about the Lord's Supper. The bread and this juice appear at first glance to be only that, bread and juice. And yet, clearly there is something much more profound that happens when we partake of this bread and juice. These elements represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ. And when we participate in this tangible expression of the gospel, our faith is nourished in some way that is transcendent, beyond the elements themselves. (For you theologians, I am NOT suggesting here any kind of transubstantiation.)