

Perfect Love

1 John 4:17-21

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There are two extremes to avoid when it comes to our view of God.

One is to view God as little more than a divine Santa Claus. He exists just to bless and shower us with gifts. He helps us when we are in need and affirms us when we're down. He is basically our good friend who listens, nods and makes us feel better when things haven't gone well. But He certainly wouldn't call us to account for doing wrong. Nor would he judge anyone. He couldn't possibly allow a place such as hell to exist. Or if there was such a place, He wouldn't keep people there very long because that would be cruel. So He would ultimately bring everyone to heaven or just end the existence. In this view, God is basically your buddy or cuddly Grandpa who wouldn't hurt a fly. He would be all about love and you relate to Him by loving Him and receiving His love.

The divine Santa Claus perspective may have developed from the other extreme view of God that once dominated. This view saw God as angry and wrathful ready to strike anyone at any time for something they did wrong. He is like a Joseph Stalin. Stalin was the former dictator of the Soviet Union. Stalin "loved" his aides and assistants until he became suspicious of them. Then one wrong step and they were gone. You could tell who was in and out of Stalin's circle by the official photographs and paintings released of him. This one saw progressively less and less aides as Stalin purged them until he was the only one left in this picture.

This view of God does not include love. It's more like He's a resident policeman looking for something you've done wrong. Then He would punish you. So if you were sick or something bad happened in your family that was God striking you for something you did. The best way to relate to a God like that is live in constant fear of His wrath. You don't dare do anything wrong. But if you do, quickly go and make amends by confessing or going to church or doing some good deed.

So we've got divine Santa Claus Grandpa on one side who sentimentally loves everyone. And then we've the wrathful, always angry God on the other side whom we related to by living in constant fear. You maybe grew up learning one of these views of God or a variation on these themes.

But the Bible presents God in a very different light. He is powerful; holy; awe inspiring; sovereign; ruler; just and righteous. But he's also kind; compassionate; tender; gentle; loving and sacrificial. God will make no allowance for

anyone to get away with sin but He made a huge allowance for us to be forgiven our sin. God is the roaring lion and the sacrificial lamb. Or as C.S. Lewis put it so classically in the Narnia series, “He’s not a tame lion.”

So how do we relate to such a God? How do we connect with someone who is absolutely holy yet reaching out in love? How do we enter into a relationship with someone who has the power to wipe out the world but also collects our tears in His bottle? Thankfully and mercifully this God reached out to us and invites us into relationship with Him. He reaches out in love. But not sentimental sweeping under the carpet type of love. It’s a perfect love.

Today, our journey through 1st John will reveal to us that **God’s perfect love grants us a great gift.** But it’s not a gift of the Santa Claus variety. It comes from the Holy God of the Universe and relates to Judgment Day. Yet this gift when received can greatly impact our lives and faith right now. I pray that in our time together today, your view and understanding of God will become more Biblical and that you will be able to see, embrace and respond to God’s perfect love given to you. Our text today is 1 John 4:17-21.

1 John 4:7-21, ESV

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. **8** Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. **9** In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. **10** In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. **11** Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. **14** And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. **15** Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. **16** 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. **17** 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. **18** There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. **19** We love because he first loved us. **20** 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. **21** And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Now if we’re going to be talking about perfect love today, we should start with what we think John means by it. He is not talking about a flawless love although God’s love is flawless. The word he uses talks about completion, full development, maturity and reaching its goal. **So perfect love is completed love – love that has reached its purpose.**

John mentions perfect love twice before we get to today's passage. 1 John 2:5 states "whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected." So God's love is completed or perfected when a person walks in obedience to His commands. Then in 4:12 we read God's love is made complete or reaches fulfillment when believers love each other. From these references, I take the perfect love talked about in verses 17-18 to be God's perfect love towards us.

So what does John say about perfect love?

Verse 17 – By this is love perfected with us. By what? I think he's referring back to verse 16 which we looked at last week – when we abide in God and God abides or lives in us. So when we live and experience the presence of God and walk in that very close fellowship with Him, His love is perfected or reaches completion in us.

What results from God's love reaching its goal in our lives? Verse 17 – "By this is love perfected with us so that we may have confidence on the Day of Judgment.

What great gift does perfect love grant? Great Gift – Part A - We may have confidence on the day of judgment. (17)

According to the Bible, either eternal life in God's presence or eternal punishment awaits all humanity. On the Day of Judgment we will all stand before Jesus. Sentence will be pronounced regarding our sin. Those whose sins against God are not covered will receive the verdict – "guilty." But Christians already know the verdict they will receive because of Christ's blood – Not guilty." Your sin has been covered. So we can have confidence going into the Day of Judgment. If we look towards that day with confidence, it indicates God's love is being perfected in us.

But you might be sending me a mental timeout right now. What is all this Day of Judgment talk? Didn't we just say that God is not the angry, bitter and wrathful God? He's not Joseph Stalin like? So where's all this judgment talk coming from?

You might not have heard of a Day of Judgment or accountability for our lives before God. Today, many people have not only minimized God but deleted Him. If God doesn't exist, there is certainly no judgment. We don't have to think about a Judgment Day. So any talk about this might seem foreign or even offensive to us.

Yet John brings it up here. He mentions it. He assumes that his readers will be familiar with the concept of Judgment Day. But John did not make up this doctrine or teaching to scare people into committing their lives to Christ.

It came from Jesus Himself. You may know the verse John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This is Jesus talking. But he goes on, John 3:17, “For God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.” So Jesus’ first coming was not about judgment. It was about salvation. So John 3:18 – Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. Then John 3:19 – this is still Jesus talking. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” So the light of Jesus’ coming amounted to a crisis for the world. Would it accept Him or reject Him? Jesus’ second coming will be a coming with judgment.

So in John 5:22 and 27, we see the Father delegate His judgment to the Son. You can avoid that judgment by believing in the Son. But in John 5:28-29, Jesus Himself says “Do not marvel at this for a time is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”

This judgment is not 30 days in jail and then you get out. It’s eternal. I know the doctrine or teaching of eternal conscious judgment is not popular today. In fact some Christians have tried to modify or delete it. But Jesus says his judgment is true or just in John 8:16. Judgment is necessary if Satan will be overthrown according to John 12:31. There can be no doubt that Jesus looked forward to an ultimate and eternal day of reckoning. John 12:48 - There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day (12:48). This would be the same Day of Judgment in 1 John 4:17. We might be offended by the Day of Judgment because we don’t think we really need to go there. We’re pretty good people compared to Joseph Stalin. But God doesn’t compare us to other people. He compares us to Himself and His Holiness. We all fall short of the glory of God – all of us have sinned. The just penalty for our sin is to go to Hell.

But John lifts the gloom of judgment by the light of God’s love which is fully perfected in us. God’s love is abundantly poured forth and given to us and is complete in every respect. We sometimes need to recall this reality to recognize how great a gift is our salvation.

We can know that God's love is reaching completion in us when we look forward to the Day of Judgment with confidence. But it's not a confidence in us. Our confidence is in what Christ has done for us.

So God's perfect love grants us the great gift of confidence on the Day of Judgment. But then verse 18 gives us great gift part B. John describes the same thing in verse 17 but from a different angle. "There is no fear in love but perfect love drives out fear. For fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

Great Gift – Part B - Fear (of judgment and punishment) is cast out. (18) Confidence on Judgment Day is one side of the coin. Cast out fear of judgment and punishment is the other side of the coin.

"So are you saying Tom that John is talking about fear of punishment on judgment day here?" Yes, I believe he is. *Well that's disappointing because I was hoping that this verse might contain some kind of hope for me to deal with my fears today – like my fear of spiders or high places or getting my eyes poked out by hangers; or my fear of illness or cancer or death; or what will happen with my child; or what will happen with my job; or my fear about my family or marriage* What good does no fear of punishment on judgment day do me today? That's a good question.

So let's try to answer it. I don't believe this verse 1 John 4:18 directly says God's perfect love casts out any fear you have of anything today. It would be delightful if that was true. Wouldn't you like to get rid of all your fears and anxieties just by God touching you with his perfect love? But I don't think we can honestly argue that from this verse.

I conclude that because of the word "punishment." Being afraid of something today does not necessarily mean you're experiencing punishment. Although the intensity of some of our fears might in themselves be a form of punishment. But I think the fear is of punishment on Judgment day. Then the argument would go something like this. People who have received God's perfect love and gained confidence for the Day of Judgment cannot at the same time be fearful of punishment on the Day of Judgment. God's perfect love casts out this fear. If you fear the punishment of Judgment Day, you either have not received God's perfect love or you have not walked with God closely enough for His love to reach perfection.

So at first glance, it may seem disappointing that this is not directly dealing with our fears today. But I think it still does indirectly deal with them. What is one of the deepest if not the deepest roots of fear? I would argue it's unbelief in God's ability to take care of us or look after us or protect us no matter what life brings. And it's understandable why we might struggle with this. Our definition of God's protection might be – no bad stuff happens or

no one gets hurt. But bad stuff does happen. People do get hurt. So we can conclude God can't really protect us or doesn't. Therefore our fear is justified.

But is it realistic to expect no bad stuff to happen and no one gets hurt in a world marred by sin? We have to live in this fallen world. So that means we might get gossiped about, lied to, betrayed, fired, misrepresented, assaulted, arrested, persecuted and even killed. We might get in accident and lose a limb or get sick and die. Maybe we view dying or getting killed as the worst thing that could happen. Yet can God take care of you and look after you even in death? What is the most dangerous soul threatening disaster we could ever face? It's Judgment Day without Christ's protection.

But Jesus' sacrifice does protect us. We can face the Day of Judgment with confidence. Such perfect love casts out fear of that most perilous event. So if God has done this great work so we don't have to fear judgment day, we can have much more confidence that He will bring us through lesser things we face.

This does not mean that we won't face scary things or tough times. But we don't face these things alone. God is with us and sees us through them. If you look back on your life God has brought you through everything you've ever gone through. The God whose perfect love casts out our fear of punishment on Judgment Day is the same God who knows our name and catches our tears. He is absolutely trustworthy. He has the amazing ability to take disasters and bring something good out of them. He will never leave or forsake you.

But we might have to reorient our expectations to the realities of this world. In our context, we have the opportunity to insulate ourselves from a lot of the world's troubles and problems. We might begin to believe and expect that we can attain and even deserve lives where nothing bad happens and no one gets hurt. But we were never promised that.

We might need to reorient ourselves to Jesus' perspective on whom or what to fear. He said, "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. **5** But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! (Luke 12:4-5, ESV) He's talking about God. Apart from Christ, we do have great reason to fear God. But Christ's covering and God's perfect love casts out that fear.

Once we have Christ in our lives, we no longer have to fear God's judgment. We can walk in His love and grace. We still walk with a healthy fear or reverence of God. But we no longer walk in fear of His Judgment on the Day. We live in Him, and He in us, for as many days as He gives us on this earth. So though verse 18 does not directly mean perfect love casts out any fear you have today, it does point to the One who dealt with our greatest fear and removed it. This same God has shown and offers His love to you today.

I have one final note on verse 18. If you are a fearless person that does not mean you're automatically right with God. Some people present themselves as unafraid of anything. But if this confidence is not grounded in what Christ has done, it's nothing more than brazen swagger. John certainly does not hold up obnoxious arrogance and confidence in self as some virtue. We gain confidence and freedom from fear because of God's perfect love.

But this does not mean that we can clutch God's love to ourselves and ignore everyone else. God's perfect love in a person will result in something. That something is love for others. In verse 19 John writes "we love because He first loved us." So we have this ability to love because God loved us and because God first loved us. Then in verse 20 he starkly unveils what lovelessness reveals.

20 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.

John tests the claim of people who say, "I love God." People prove they love God whom they cannot see by loving people they can see. So to claim "I love God" while not loving others makes one a liar. A person who claims to be a Christian but who does not love his brothers and sisters is self-deceived. And they actually violate God's commands. **21** And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. This was Jesus' answer to the question about the greatest commandment. "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. And you must love your neighbor as yourself." So in some way the perfect love that casts out fear casts out hatred as well.

My friends, I don't know what view of God you grew up with. God has offered you His perfect love. When embraced, it gives confidence for Judgment Day and casts out the fear of God's holy and just punishment. It does not cast out the hard realities of life. But it does show that our God who dealt with our greatest fear can certainly see us

through our other fears. So we must take our fears to God and replace them with faith in Him. You build faith by asking God for it and reading the accounts of the Bible of how God came through for His people again and again.

If you walk today in fear of Judgment Day, God might be revealing to you that you don't know Him. You have never received the salvation and love that He offers through Christ. So will you receive Christ by putting all your trust in Him and His work? Then you too will can gain confidence for the Day of Judgment and have reason to replace fear with faith.