



Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

1 John 4:13–21

Introduction

I want to begin this morning by broaching a topic that most of us, myself included, likely don't spend a great deal of time thinking about in our day-to-day lives. This may be due in part to the fact that it makes us feel kind of uncomfortable, and it may also be due to the fact that it occupies a space in our mind reserved for the far future—that often-neglected space which houses the things we know we'll have to get around to thinking about eventually but don't really have the time or energy to think about right now. I'm talking about absolutely nobody's favourite thing to think about: judgement. Specifically, eternal judgement.

We don't often stop to remember that Scripture clearly tells us that a day is coming—the Day of Judgement—in which our Lord Jesus Christ will return to judge both the living and the dead. One day, you and I will stand before the Righteous Judge of the universe and give an account for every thought we've ever had, every word we've ever spoken, and every deed we've ever done. Jesus himself said in Luke 8:17 that, *"nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light."*

How does that make you feel this morning? What emotions are stirred up in your heart when you cast your mind forward to that day? If you're anything like me, you have probably thought, said, and done some things that you're not particularly proud of, and you would probably be absolutely mortified if any those things were, say, to be projected on the screens behind me right now for everyone else to see and hear. Whatever those things are, of course, God already knows, and we're promised that one day every one of them will be made known. As the author of Hebrews tells us, "*no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*"

Again I ask, how does that make you feel this morning? If I had to guess, I'd say that for most of us, the thought of this kind of complete exposure naturally leads our hearts to fear. As John Stott wisely pointed out, fear lives within us by nature. Fear is so often how we operate in this world, and it is the operative principle behind so many things that take place all around us each and every day.

Without question, the same would have been true for John's audience in first century, especially as they were being harassed by false teachers who were actively trying to lead them astray from the gospel. John was writing to a discouraged and worn out church who were being led to question some of the most foundational truths of the Christian faith, and with a tender heart, he wrote to encourage them and to assure them that they did not need to fear.

At this point in the letter, John has just finished beautifully expressing the amazing love of God, and he continues in our passage today with another message of assurance and encouragement for his readers centered upon the person and work of the Holy Spirit. As we begin, my first point is this: **Understand the Work of the Spirit.**

Understand the Work of the Spirit (vv. 13–16)

John begins in verse 13, "*By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*" For anyone in John's audience (and also anyone here this morning) who would question whether or not they are really Christians, whether or not they really belong to God, whether or not they are truly his child, John aims to settle their hearts with this glorious truth. We know that we belong to God because he has given us his Spirit.

Now, straight away there are a number of ways that we could understand John's meaning. One of the most common readings of this verse is that the Holy Spirit who indwells all believers provides an internal, subjective confidence in the hearts of Christians so that they know deep down in the hearts that they really are true Christians. The apostle Paul himself testifies to this reality in the book of Romans. In Chapter 8, verse 16, he writes, "*the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*" But while it is true that the Holy Spirit does provide an internal, subjective confidence to all of God's people, is that what John is talking about here?

Another possibility is that John is saying that the Holy Spirit produces fruit in our lives that we can look to as objective proof that we truly belong to God. This language is also biblical. As Jesus himself said of false prophets in Matthew 7:16 that, "*You will recognize them by their fruits,*" so also in many places throughout the Bible do we see that the Fruit of the Spirit is evident in the lives of all believers. Perhaps John is saying that our love for each other is evidence of the Spirit's presence within us, so that we can know for certain that we belong to God because we can see the outward proof of the Spirit's transformation in our lives. But again, we need to ask, is this what John is talking about? To get a firm answer to this question, we need to consider what comes next.

Beginning in verse 14, John writes, "*And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.*" It is very important for us to recognize that John follows his statement about God giving his Spirit with the language of *testimony* and *confession*.

I am very much indebted here to the work of Colin Kruse, whose extensive study in the Gospel of John and the Letters of John benefitted me greatly in my preparation. He noted that in the writings of John, the Holy Spirit always serves primarily as a witness to Jesus Christ. For example, not far back in 1 John, in chapter 3, verse 24, John wrote something very similar. If you remember, he said, "*And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.*" What follows immediately afterward, in the very next verse, is a discussion about testing the spirits and about the importance of confessing the truth about Jesus. There we see the same pattern we have in our passage today—a reference to the giving of the Holy Spirit followed by a discussion of testimony and confession regarding the truths about Jesus.

This, I believe, is what John is getting at in verse 13 when he says, "*By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*" How do we know that God has given us of his Spirit? What does the Spirit accomplish in us and for us that allows us to know for certain that we belong to God? Well, the Spirit bears witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ, and John says that we know that he has been given to us because we have believed His testimony.

Let's go back to verse 14 so we can unpack this a little further. There, John writes, "*And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.*" First, when John uses the plural pronoun 'we,' who is he referring to? Here, as in the very beginning of the letter, John is referring to himself and to the other

apostles who followed Jesus, witnessed his death, resurrection, and ascension, and who received the Holy Spirit to empower their witness of him to the ends of the earth.

We can see this testifying work, of both the Holy Spirit and the apostles, in a few places throughout the New Testament. In John 15:26-27, Jesus said to his disciples, *"when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning."* Again, in the book of Acts, after the ascension of Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church at Pentecost, Peter would say to the High Priest in Jerusalem that, *"we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."*

Throughout this letter, and throughout the writings of John more broadly, the Holy Spirit's primary role is to serve as a witness to Jesus, and he accomplishes this witness both through the external testimony of the apostles and through the internal testimony within every believer. Put simply, it is the Holy Spirit who empowered the proclamation of the gospel—beginning with the apostles—and it is the same Spirit that empowers each and every one of us to accept it and believe their testimony.

Brothers and sisters, don't ever forget that salvation is a work of God from beginning to end. It is God who chooses to save his people, it is God who grants faith and repentance as a gift, and it is God who brings new life to each and every person whom he enables to trust in the finished work of his Son. We do not choose God. Apart from him, we are dead in our trespasses and sins and unable to will ourselves into trusting Him. And how does God accomplish these things? He accomplishes them through the Holy Spirit whom he freely gives to those whom he calls out of darkness into his marvelous light.

And so, how do we know that we abide in him and he in us? How do we know for certain that we belong to him? *"Because he has*

given us of his Spirit”—the Spirit who testifies to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and who empowers each one of us to believe it.

Christian, if you are here this morning and you have trusted in Jesus. If you have responded to the good news of Jesus Christ in the gospel with faith and repentance, you did not produce that in yourself. God produced it in you by means of his Spirit. John could not be any clearer about this when he says in verse 15, *“Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.”* Here, Paul’s words to the Corinthians are also very relevant for us. In 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12, Verse 3, Paul writes, *“Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.”*

If you have trusted in Jesus, you belong to God. That is what John wanted his readers to know as they faced the attacks of false teachers who were trying to lead them astray. If you believe and confess the truth about Jesus, you belong to God. Full stop. No qualification. If you confess Jesus, there is no other explanation than the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart. The great baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon said it like this, “Let Christ be God to you, and you are saved. If you take Him to be the Son of God, and consequently rest your eternal hopes on Him, God dwells in you, and you dwell in God.”

Now, some of you may be looking at verses 14 and 15 and feeling a little bit confused. You may have noticed that verse 14 speaks of the testimony *“that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world,”* while verse 15 speaks of confessing *“that Jesus is the Son of God.”* Why doesn’t John use the same language in these two verses?

Remember that John was speaking against those who were trying to lead the church astray. We can see throughout this letter that

their teaching took a variety of forms—from denying that they have sinned, to denying that Jesus really existed in human form, to denying the necessity of his atoning work—and John's audience would have been intimately familiar with their teachings. We don't want to forget that John is writing into a specific context in which his audience would have known what he was talking about, and he didn't need to spell out every single detail of the false teacher's beliefs every single time he mentioned them. Referencing one part of their teaching would effectively served as a reference the whole, and so both of the ways John speaks in verses 14 and 15 reflect the same core truths.

And just what are these core truths? We can most easily discern this by looking again at the end of verse 14, where we remind ourselves that John said “we [that is, he and the other apostles] *have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.*”

John Stott sharply observed that, “Much Christian truth is contained in the straightforward affirmation of verse 14. Here is the essence of the gospel. The world means sinful society, estranged from God and under the dominion of the evil one. Its urgent need was to be rescued from sin and Satan. And the Father so loved the world that he sent his Son, his dear and only Son, to be its Saviour.” Crucial to this message is the very nature of Jesus himself, that he was both fully man (as the false teachers denied) and that he was fully God, as we see in verse 15. The twin affirmations of verse 14 and 15 are two sides of the same gospel coin. Both of them point to the same gospel truths. Commenting on verse 15, John Calvin wrote, “*when [John] says that Jesus is the Son of God, he briefly includes the sum and substance of faith; for there is nothing necessary for salvation which faith finds not in Christ.*”

Throughout this entire letter, if you dig down to the bottom, you find every time that the foundation of John's writing is the good news of the gospel. It is the message of the love of a God “*who shows his*

love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). It is the message of the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the good news that Jesus, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, was born into this world as a man and lived a perfect, sinless life in full obedience to every one of God's commands. It is the good news that Jesus' perfectly kept the law and then died in the place of sinners, among whom we were all once counted, who had all failed to live up to its perfect, holy standard. It is the good news that his life made him the perfect, spotless sacrifice who on the cross bore the punishment of eternal wrath that we all deserved to face. It is the good news that, as we are united to him by faith through the Holy Spirit, we are cleansed from our sin, clothed in his perfect righteousness, and kept blameless by him for all of eternity. This is the message of the gospel. It is the message that we all cling to, in which we find our hope, and it is the only message that we would ever dare cling to.

Dear saints, if you have trusted in Jesus today, if by faith alone you are clinging to Christ alone for your eternal hope, you belong to God, because that faith can only be produced by the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. *"By this we know that we abide in him and he in us,"* John says, *"because he has given us of his Spirit."*

John finishes this section in verse 16, which he begins by saying, *"so we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us."* Let me ask you a question: do you sometimes struggle to believe that God loves you? Do the circumstances of your life sometimes cause you to wonder whether God might actually be against you? Do you want to know where you can look to see his love for you more clearly displayed than anywhere else? Look to the cross. Look to your suffering Saviour who chose to hang there for you. Look to the one who gave his only Son to redeem you for Himself, and look to the Son who drained the cup of God's wrath down to the dregs so that you will never have to taste a single drop.

I often appreciate the artful and poetic way that the great baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, preached, and here's what he had to say about the marvelous love of God in Christ: "*And how did He love me? He loved me so that He gave up His only begotten Son for me, to be nailed to the tree, and made to bleed and die. And what will come of it? Because He loved me and forgave me, I am on the way to heaven. He loved me before I was born. He loved me before a star began to shine, and He has never ceased to do so all these years. When I have sinned He has loved me. When I have forgotten Him He has loved me. When in the days of my sin I cursed Him, still He loved me. And He will love me when my knees tremble, and my hair is gray with age; even to advanced age He will bear and carry His servant. He will love me when the world is ablaze, and love me forever and forever.*"

John continues by reminding us that "*God is love,*" and as we discussed in my previous sermon, this isn't so much an attempt by John to give a comprehensive theology of God's entire being, "but rather," in the words of Kruse, "a statement about the loving nature of God revealed in his saving action on behalf of humankind." God isn't *only* love or *merely* love. He is much more than that, but love is the primary means by which he interacts with the world he created.

Finally, John tells us, at the very end of verse 16, "*whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*" In this context, abiding in love means abiding in the love that God has for us. It means resting in the finished work of Christ and knowing without a doubt that we belong to him. I appreciated a footnote here from the ESV Study Bible that said, "Assurance of salvation, while never an arrogant presumption, can become a settled state of mind and heart."

I began this sermon by talking about the reality of judgement, and we will be returning to that discussion in a moment. John is about to go on to discuss how we can have confidence before God as we stand before him on that great judgement day, and it all begins as we

Understand the Work of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who testifies to the person and work of Jesus Christ and who produces faith and repentance in his beloved saints, and it is that Spirit-wrought work that gives us assurance that we belong to God and that gives us the ability to rest entirely in God's love for us. Put another way, the apostle Paul, in Romans 5:5, says, *"God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."*

So, what does all of this have to do with judgement? Well, John is about to tell us. In light of all these things, my second point is this: **Do Not Fear Judgement.**

Do Not Fear Judgement (vv. 17–18)

Beginning in verse 17, John writes, *"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. 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."*

Here, John is looking back to the previous verse and saying that as we rest in love of God for us in Christ, we know with confidence that God abides in us and we abide in him, and that is how love is perfected with us. Remember that we've seen this word 'perfected' a few times already in 1 John. Rather than carrying the meaning of "flawless" or "spotless" like we would often think of this word today, in Scripture it often carries stronger sense of 'fulfilled' or 'completed.' In fact, some translators prefer to use the word 'completed' rather than 'perfected' here, and some of you may see that in your bibles if you're using a translation other than the ESV. The idea here is that God's love for us completes its goal and fulfils its purposes in us when we rest fully and completely in the finished work of Christ. That kind of rest is what God's love is intended to produce in his people.

Dear saints, God *wants* you to rest in his love and he *wants* you to not be afraid. This is his design and purpose for all of his children. He doesn't want you to constantly be afraid that he is ready to drop the hammer on you if you mess up. He doesn't want you to constantly wonder whether or not you are doing good enough to earn his approval. He is a tender, warm, gentle, and loving Father who wants you to have confidence to run to him and rest in his fatherly love for you. In Hebrews 4:16, the author tells us how we ought to respond to God because Jesus is now our great high priest. He writes, *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."* Your Father wants you to run to him to receive mercy and find grace, not in your best moments, but in your times of greatest need.

As God's love toward us in Christ is perfected in us, it produces wonderful results in our lives. In this case, John points us to two specific things, and the first is found in the rest of verse 17. *"By this is love perfected with us,"* John says, *"so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world."* When we rest in the love God for us in Christ, we can have confidence for the day of judgement. We can stand before the resurrected Christ on that final day and know with certainty that the Righteous Judge of all the universe is also our Loving Saviour who has promised that he will never leave us or forsake us; that the Judge himself is the very one who bled and died for you. And, most importantly for our passage this morning, that the Judge is the very one who cleanses you from sin and who replaces your filthy, sin-stained robes with the spotless, shining robes of his perfect righteousness.

This is precisely what John means when he says, *"as he is so also are we in this world."* Here, John is referring to Jesus. As Jesus is so also are we in the world. And what is Jesus? Jesus is righteous, he is holy, and he is beloved by the Father. He is the one over whom the Father proclaimed in Matthew 3:17, *"This is my beloved Son, with*

whom I am well pleased." Brothers and sisters, if you are in Christ this morning, if you are united to him by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit, that declaration is the very same declaration that God makes over you each and every day; on your best days and on your worst days, no matter how well you've performed, no matter how disciplined you have been, no matter what trials you face, and no matter how much or how many times you've failed.

Make no mistake, one day you will stand before the Judge of the universe. That fact hasn't changed; that day is real, and it is coming. And on that day, you, like everyone else, will be judged on the basis of how well you have kept the perfect Law of God. But if you are in Christ, if you have trusted in his finished work on your behalf, you will stand before the final judgement clothed in the righteousness of Jesus. You will be judged on the basis of *his* obedience to the law and not your own. That is why you need not fear in the day of judgement. That is why you can have confidence to stand before him. In the words of the beautiful 19th-century hymn written by Edward Mote, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."

John goes on to say in verse 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.*" Here's where, if we aren't being careful, we can find ourselves getting confused. It would be easy to conclude, as many have, that John is saying here that if we ever fear judgement we must not be genuine Christians. Brothers and sisters, let me assure you that is certainly not the case, and the reason comes down to that tricky little word "*perfected*" that we already talked about.

John is saying here that when we fully rest in the love of God for us in Christ, when that love is rooted deeply in our hearts, fear is cast out—hurled away—far from us. The reason, he says, is because "*fear has to do with punishment*." The word translated "punishment" here is quite rare in the Bible and only occurs in one other place in the

New Testament, and in both of its occurrences it clearly refers to divine, eternal punishment. John is saying that, in the helpful words of Stott, "fear introduces the category of punishment, which is quite alien to God's forgiven children who love him." That is to say, when we rest in God's love for us, when we know that we have been chosen, loved, and forgiven, the category of punishment, eternal judgement, really isn't a part of our spiritual vocabulary. Like oil and water, the two simply do not mix. Because, as John has already told us, "*perfect love* [that is, God's love for us in Christ] *casts out fear*."

So what does John mean when he says, "*whoever fears has not been perfected in love*?" If we remember that this word could just as easily be translated as 'completed,' this verse begins to make a little more sense. In essence, John is saying that if you as God's child are afraid of judgement, it means that you aren't fully resting in his love. You haven't fully understood it, haven't fully grasped it, haven't fully internalized it. And do you know what? This is a very common experience for all of God's people. I found a wonderful footnote in the Reformation Study Bible that speaks this point. It said, "God's love is perfect in itself, and it brings to us the sure promise of final perfection as soon as we receive it. But because we are being made perfect in His love over time, the remnants of fear may temporarily coexist with love. "Perfected love" from God "casts out fear" progressively rather than instantaneously."

So, what should you do if you experienced a sense of fear when I began my introduction talking about the Day of Judgement? Should you doubt that you truly belong to God? Absolutely not. That is not John's intentions for his hearers in this passage, and it is not his intention for you today. If you are in Christ today, **Do Not Fear the Final Judgement**. Because "*as he is so also are we in this world*."

Love One Another (vv. 19–21)

And so, confidence for the Day of Judgement is the first of two results of the Spirit's work in our lives as he testifies as a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and produces faith and repentance in the hearts of his people. The second result of the Spirit's work in us is love for one another, and that means that my final point this morning is a very familiar one for many of us: **Love One Another**.

John writes, beginning in verse 19, *"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."*

These verses should come as no surprise to us if we are at all familiar with where we already came from in this letter, because love for one another has been one of John's primary points all throughout, and almost exclusively since verse 11 of chapter 3.

Now, John has been very clear: love for one another is not a *prerequisite* for our salvation, but it is the certain *outflow* of our salvation. That's why John begins by repeating a point that he has already made back in chapter 4 verse 10. There he said, *"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."* Perhaps that is why, here in verse 19, John felt the freedom to say the same thing with far fewer words, in the process providing us with one of the most wonderfully concise and distinct teachings on love in the entire Bible—*"We love because he first loved us."* In essence, John is saying, in the words of one of my favourite preachers, "we are the redeemed, so let's do what the redeemed do." And what do the redeemed do? **We Love One Another**.

John ends our passage this morning in verses 20–21. Here, he is effectively wrapping up his argument that began back in verse 7, which focused very particularly on the importance on Christian love. He begins by providing a negative example in the first half of verse 20, *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar."*

John, as we know, is not one to mince words, nor is he one to pull his punches. He is a warm, tender, and loving shepherd, but he is also very happy to state truth with immense force when pushing back against the false teachers who threaten his beloved church. In all honesty, this statement stands on its own without the need for any further comment from me, so I'll just read it again before moving on, *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar."*

John continues by providing further reasoning for his previous statement, *"for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."* Here, John makes what is known as an 'argument from lesser to greater.' The argument goes like this—loving someone you can see is much easier than loving someone you can't see, so if you can't do the easier thing, you won't be able to do the hard thing either.

John concludes in verse 21. He writes, *"And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."* John has already made references to Jesus' commandment in John 13:34, where he said, *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."* Don't forget that Jesus spoke those words directly in John's presence, so it's no surprise that John took them to heart and made them a core part of his teaching. Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another, and so John's argument is a simple one. *"whoever loves God must also love his brother."* And by his grace, Jesus doesn't simply give the commandment. He also gives us his Spirit who produces that love within us when we rest in him.

Conclusion

And so, what emotions are stirred up in your heart when you cast your mind forward to that day? What do you feel when you think about the fact that you will one day stand before the righteous Judge of the universe to give an account? In this passage, John tells us that we can know with confidence that we belong to God as His beloved children because He has given us of his Spirit. It is this Spirit who testifies to the gospel of Jesus Christ and who produces in us the faith and repentance that gives us confidence for that final judgement day and leads us to love one another as we have first been loved. May we all rest in the finished work of Christ, and as we rest in him, let us approach our God with confidence and love one another fervently until the day he returns, not to condemn us, but to take us home. Let's pray.