

Perfected Love

a sermon in the series
Life in the Son

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at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.
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I John 4:17-18

“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.”

God does not want you to be timid with Him. What might be considered reverence may very well be an ungodly fear, a timidity that dishonors the Lord. If God's glory rests in His graciousness to sinners, how could you, with your fear of Him, be a good representative of His loving-kindness? How could you truly be afraid of someone who loves you more than anyone else ever could and who wants the absolute best for you? It's nonsensical. The Lord God wants His children to be bold in His presence, respectful, but bold.

As we see in our text, the love of God works to give us boldness. In Hebrews 4:16 it says we are to come boldly to God's throne—characterized as “a throne of grace”—for the purpose, “that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Faith is not timid. It's neither fainthearted nor flinching. Faith, with unshaken resolve, is assured it will receive from Him the answer it seeks. It is not afraid.

Well, you say, doesn't the Bible teach that we ought to fear the Lord? Yes, but the fear it exhorts is not a cowardly, shy, and frightened kind of fear. Do you really believe the Bible tells you to be frightened by God? I don't think so.

That kind of fear does not promote relationship because people avoid those whom they are frightened of. The fear the Bible commands is a respect dictating your side of the relationship with God. You approach the Lord with the utmost reverence or honor befitting His position and stature.

The only way I know how to describe the kind of fear we are and are not to possess is to explain my relationship with my earthly father, Paul Durham.

When I was a small boy, I was very afraid of my father and avoided him because I feared he might, for no reason, be displeased with me. I cannot claim to be a perfect child, I was far from it; I was often mischievous as small boys usually are. But I can tell you that to evoke my father's displea-

sure had frightening consequences for a little boy. However, as I got older and got to know my dad and learned him, my timidity lessened and in its place a respect grew. I learned he did love me and would sacrifice himself for me. There was nothing he would not do for me and I didn't doubt his love, yet I knew if I displeased him there would be disagreeable consequences. But instead of apprehension I had a confidence in my father's love. The fear I had as a child did not honor my father, but the fear I had when I was older greatly respected him and brought about my submission to his authority.

In the same way, I think we honor our heavenly Father with a reverence that holds Him in highest regards, realizing that if we displease Him the consequences will not be enjoyable while remaining confident and not apprehensive in His love for us.

I think some Christians have a timid fear of God, but if they will grow in knowledge of their heavenly Father this timidity will evolve into a healthy, biblical fear we are supposed to have. If you will simply believe in this perfect love of God, all torment will leave. You will be able to enjoy the presence of God. No longer will you avoid the Lord because He frightens you, you will joyfully come into His presence. In fact, I want to say to you that this kind of fear is what perfect love is.

I. The Fear of the Judgment

A. The Certainty of the Day

The day of judgment is legitimate. Every sinner ought to be afraid and frightened by God's judgment. The prospect of being held accountable for your sins is frightening. The Apostle John acknowledges there is a day of judgment.

“Love has been perfected in us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment.”

It is certain—there is coming a day when the Lord will judge all mankind, but for the Christian there should be no fear of this. There should be no trembling of soul or heart. A Christian is not someone who has made a profession and had his or her name added to a church roll, oh no. A Christian is one who walks with God and delights in God because he has come to know the love of the Father. For us who have been saved, there ought not to be a fear but boldness in the day of judgment.

Friends, don't mock the doomsayers who says judgment is coming. It is easy to make fun of the fellow who stands on the corner with a sandwich board that says, “Repent, for the day of the Lord comes.” It's easy to make light of it and thereby make light of the idea of a day of judgment, but listen, the Bible is clear. “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.”

If you are not a Christian this is all the heaven you will experience. For those who stand before the judgment seat of God with their iniquities and robes of their own righteousness will not be able to survive that day. It is not a day we Christians rejoice in, we do not take heart that some

of you will stand trembling before the judgment seat of God with no excuse, banished from the presence of God. There cannot be joy in that for us. That's why we tear up and we weep and pray and cry out to God on your behalf that He would have mercy and that you would awaken out of your sinful stupor and come to your senses and know that this is the day of salvation, now is the acceptable time. We pray for you because we believe in the certainty of His judgment.

B. The Fear of the Day.

There ought to be fear. If you do not know Christ Jesus and aren't hiding in His refuge of safety you ought to be afraid, for in that hour where will you hide? There will be no place where you can go to find safety from the eyes of the Lord that search to and fro and see all things. There will be no place for you to escape His searing gaze. There you will be before the Holy One, naked, with only your sins to cover you. But they will not dull His laser-like sight and He will look into your heart and find you wanting. Can you imagine standing before almighty God who can see through you and know everything about you? Every excuse you will offer He will know is a lie and in the end that is all you will have as a refuge—your lies and they will not be able to stand under the scrutiny and scorching heat of His truthfulness. He knows the truth about you. You ought to be afraid.

But what's sad today is that most people who are not Christians are not afraid of this day. The unsaved person doesn't think about this day, they try to ignore it. I asked an atheist after he had been saved, "What did you think was going to happen to you after you died?"

He said, "I thought I'd be nothingness, just like an old rock, nothing. I'd be gone. Nothing to it."

"Did you ever think about dying and the possibility of judgment?"

"No, I wouldn't let my mind go there," He said.

Thankfully God saved that man and showed him the truth—there was a judgment and he wasn't prepared for it and the only refuge was Jesus Christ Himself. He ran and hid in Christ and today he knows no fear. But before he was converted, his defense was the same many of you in this room have. You refuse to think about the day of the Lord when you shall be brought before Him, and all the books will be opened and everything you have done, every evil deed and idle word will be rehearsed before you. Things you have now forgotten and do not remember will come back, tormenting your soul. They will throb in you worse than a migraine and there will be no excuse.

You ought to be afraid and yet you casually go through this world as if there is no day of judgment, no day of reckoning, no day of setting things right. You're quite happy in what you do. You find enjoyment in this world and hope it will not end. What a sad tragedy that a judgment awaits you and you have no consideration of it.

II. The Christian Should Not Fear the Day of Judgment

Let me direct your attention back to the text, because this is for Christians, not sinners. John is writing to the Christian and is saying that you and I should not be afraid but have boldness. Let me read the text again.

“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.”

Christians ought not to fear this day of judgment. The Bible says there is a new relationship between you and the Creator; He is now your Father and you are now His child. Before you were saved, as God was drawing you to Himself, the fear of the Lord became predominant and you began to tremble on the inside knowing you had no answer for your sins. You were burdened that there was no place to run and hide. God made you to feel as if the judgment day had already come and you were already standing bare before God—He could see all of your sins. And you saw them also, without excuse, and you were afraid.

But that moment when you believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, that bondage of fear left. Listen to what the Apostle Paul said in Romans 8,

“For you did not receive a spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the spirit of adoption whereby we cry out ‘Abba Father.’”

The Apostle Paul is saying for any Christian to go back into fear is to go back into bondage. It's as if you are still enslaved in your sins and there is no way out. But God has not given the child of God such a spirit of bondage again. That happens before you are saved, we call it conviction of sin. Now the child of God can cry out “Abba Father! Dear Daddy, oh my Father!” That's a term of dearness, of closeness, of intimacy. You may feel that way and say it because the Spirit of God has been given to you. Dear child of God, if you are so frightened of God that you avoid Him and are worried that He might find some fault in you, let me assure you that is not the inheritance that He has granted unto you as a child of God. That's not what He intends for you.

A. Reasons the Christian Should Not Fear God's Judgment.

We should not be afraid of this day of judgment. Let me give you reasons why here in the text.

1. Because God's love is perfect.

How would you describe perfect love? I'm sure wives have a list already prepared. Please, leave it in your purse, dear ladies, and let's look to God and ask Him for help as we put forth this list.

It's perfect. The word *perfect* here can be translated *complete or full maturity*. The love of God for you is full and lacking nothing. God loves you with all of His heart and, by the way, His heart is infinite in size. God loves you with boundless love, a full, complete, mature love lacking nothing.

There is nothing missing in the love of God for you. If you feel there is something lacking that's a problem you've presented for yourself and it's not true. The love of God is perfect toward you.

2. Perfect love is not based upon my performance.

What kind of love is it that says, "I'll love you if you love me?" Is that what love is? No. Yet, so many people enter the holy bonds of matrimony with that definition of love and when they don't feel loved they check out and are gone. No wonder the divorce rate is nearly fifty percent in this country; we've defined love wrongly. Perfect love says, "I love you just because." And, by the way, that's what your Father says about you. *I just love you because.*

It's not based upon your performance. There is no hint that God's love is based upon me. I can rest assured in boldness and confidence that when I stand before God, judgment will not really be about me but about His love for me, manifested in my life by grace. Does that mean the Christian will not have to give an account? We Christians will have to give testimony of our service to the Lord, but the judgment of the saint is not like the judgment of the sinner. For the Christian the judgment will be determine how we will be rewarded throughout all eternity, which will be an act of God's loving grace. Every reward is more a gift than it is a payment of service.

The Bible makes this absolutely clear in the first chapter of verse 10, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us." God didn't love you because He knew you were going to repent of your sins, trust, and serve Him. Did He know that? Yes. But that's not the basis of His love. His love is based on one fact and one fact alone: He is love. In the very next verse following our text we read, "We love Him because He first loved us." The love of God is not dependent upon my performance. Praise God!

3. It's a secure love.

Notice this love grants us boldness. Boldness is an emotion and a stance based upon security. We are secure in God's love and that grants boldness in the Day of Judgment. God's love for you is secure. It does not depend on what you've done but what He's done. Those beautiful words in the last two verses of the eighth chapter of Romans speak security,

"For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

There it is. That's perfect love. Secure, not based upon your performance, full and complete. That's the way He loves you. Now tell me, why would you be afraid of Him? Why can you not stand before Him boldly, because it is His love for you that causes you to stand before Him.

There's another reason you can be bold and not fear the Day of Judgment and that's because God's love is manifested in a Savior sent. I want you to harken back past our text to verse ten.

This is part of the context,

“In this is love, not that we love God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

There it is. How do I know God loves me? Because He sent Jesus for me. Why did He do that? Why would His love go so far as to sacrifice His Son for such a rebel as me? The same reason He will do it for you. The reason is I needed to be rescued from my sins and there was no hope. I could not save me and you cannot save you. No religion could save us. No religious official of any church could rescue us and deliver us from sin’s grip. We needed one from out of this world to come into this world and rescue us and the only one who could do it was the Son of God Himself. The responsibility could not fall to an angel, but only to God Himself. Do you know why angels could not do it? I believe the angels have love for us; I think they are sent to minister to us and they love us in their way, but to compare the love of an angel to the love of God is ludicrous to even try. God loves you. That’s why He sacrificed His Son. That is the only explanation—just because He loved you.

Oh, I could give you theological reasons; even John gives us a theological based answer with the word propitiation. It’s a word that means sacrifice to put away the anger of God and make God accessible to us. That’s a theologically packed word. But there is still this haunting question: *Why for me?! Why would you sacrifice Jesus as a propitiation, a sacrifice, that would make You draw near to me and I be able to draw near to You?* The only reason that makes sense is His love, because I’m not worth saving. None of us have been worth it. It is only explained by love.

The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus’ mission in the second chapter beginning in verse 14,

“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Dear Christian, God does not want you to linger one more moment in a fear that would be frightening and cause you to avoid Him. You were locked into that before you were saved. You were squarely within the prison of fear and bondage, but Jesus Christ has come with the keys of God’s love and has unlocked that door and said, You may go free for I condemn you not. That’s the word. You’re free this morning because Jesus Christ has come in your place. In your place He stood the ground you were deserved to stand and He did not flee or flinch. He stood there and took it all for you. Why then are you afraid of Him? There is no excuse for it. God’s Word says perfect love casts out fear.

III. How Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

A. Some Christians Still Fear

Some Christians still fear God in this immature and ungodly way. Some of you in my audience today, still fear God in this unhealthy and unbiblical way. It's not the biblical, healthy reverence of the Lord. Look at verse eighteen,

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.”

It doesn't say God hasn't loved these Christians, for He has loved them. It says they haven't been made perfect in love. They still dread Him; they are timid in His presence, fearful that He will find something wrong about them.

Luther has an interesting way of translating John's words *fear involves torment*, he said the words could literally be translated *fear has its own agony*, and that is true, is it not? Fear has its own agony. What is fear's agony? The torment of not knowing what is will happen.

I remember as a boy trying to think what eternity must be like. I would tick off a thousand years and then a million years and thought, *Well, now what are we going to do?* And then I would project forward another million years and fear would set in. I felt like I began to spiral down into a pit of doom. My brain could not compute time without end and because I don't know what that's like I was frightened by it. In fact, it wasn't just when I was a little boy, I've done that as an adult. There is a natural tendency to be afraid of things we don't know. The fear of the unknown. What happens after one dies? What is the death experience like? What happens when you pass through the veil of death, what is on the other side? We really don't know. Very few have gone through the veil only to come back and tell us. We have a little knowledge by what is told in the Bible, we know to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, but what does that mean and what will that be like? And the more you begin to think about life after death you realize you know little about it and great is the possibility of being afraid of it. In fact, I don't know of any Christian that hasn't at times been afraid of the process of death because they don't know what to expect.

Then there is the torment of fear's imagination. Have not experienced this? Have you ever been afraid and then imagined every possibility of something going wrong and how it will end in greater disaster? That's how fear works. It has its own agony that will delve deep and cut and thrash until you can find no peace and cannot be happy at all. Some of you are that way when it comes to walking with God. There is no happiness at all in it. Fear and all its agony has gripped you and you are constantly agonized in mind and soul. I've come to tell you to be at peace today. God is not against you. He's for you and He loves you with a perfect love.

B. How Can A Christian Not Fear?

Let me give you two things based upon the last part of verse 17. This phrase is a sermon in itself, and perhaps more than one sermon could come out of this clause, but I will limit it only to a few minutes.

“Because as He is, so are we in this world.”

There is the answer to how you as a Christian can cast out your fear with the perfect love of God. How is that?

1. Know and believe the doctrine of justification by faith

Every true Christian afraid of God in a frightened way is a person that has not yet believed in the doctrine of justification by faith with all of their heart and mind. What is that doctrine? Let me use myself as an example. John is dealing with loving God and loving each other. We'll get to that the next time we come back to this chapter and finish it a couple of weeks from now. So here I am trying to tell you to love God and love one another when I myself don't do either very well. I still sin. I still have issues and I still am tempted. How then can I stand here with such audacity and try to tell you what to do when I myself am imperfect and full of sinful issues? Here is how—I know where my hiding place is. I know in whom I have believed.

Rock of ages, cleft for me let me hide myself in Thee.

There it is. That's the Gospel once again—Christ has died and when you trust in Him you are placed in Him, hidden away, saved from the wrath of God. That's your position with the Father, one with Christ. *As He is so are we.* Oh, friend, believe it. You say you don't feel it, of course you don't feel it. I don't feel like Jesus, I don't even know what that would feel like, but I don't have to feel like Him I have to *believe* Him when He says *as He is so are we.*

Justification by faith is the cornerstone of the Christian faith and it has been so neglected and dishonored that so many of us today still do not understand that when Jesus died for us He suffered everything we deserved.

Fearful Christians don't believe that. Listen to me closely. They believe Jesus died for all their past sins, but it's the sins they committed yesterday, or this morning they struggle with. What is the answer for that? One particular group of “churchmen,” professing to be Christians decided that there church services would be a re-crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This is how the Roman Catholic Church approaches this question.

When someone who is a Catholic enters a Roman Catholic Church they dip their fingers in the water and cross themselves. They will genuflect and look to the front of the church and whisper a little prayer. Do you know why they do this? Because at the front there is a box and within it is a loaf of bread that they believe is the literal body of Christ. Not a symbol or emblem, but literally the body of Jesus Christ. That's why they bow and get respectful and quiet—they're in the presence of their god. So, when they gather together for their services and the priest breaks the bread and takes the cup, they believe he possesses the power to turn that bread into the literal body of Jesus so they can eat of His body and drink of His blood. By this they believe they participate in the ongoing forgiveness for sins they committed that week.

I remember talking to a Catholic lady who was so concerned that her daughter get her sins confessed to the priest before she was confirmed because if she didn't he couldn't confirm her. I asked what would happen if on the way to the priest she died in a car wreck, what would happen to her soul? She said, "I don't know and don't even want to think about it." Friends, that's not the gospel. Some superstitious tradition is not the answer.

Let me make this clear yet again. When your Savior died on the cross and uttered the words "It is finished," He did not just mean His life was over, He meant everything you owed to God's justice had been paid. Everything—past, present and future. That's not all. Justification says while He received all of your wicked, evil deeds, and was punished for them, you get every righteous deed He ever did. I don't know of any breath He ever took that wasn't pure, holy and righteous before God. It's as if you lived those 33 sinless years on this earth, it's as if you had done all of our Lord's works of righteousness, it's as if you obeyed the Father's will perfectly. That's what justification means. That's the way God views you.

A pastor said to me last week they were rejoicing in the doctrine of justification. He had been preaching for years and was now coming to fully understand with joy this blessed doctrine of justification and his oneness with Christ. He said, "I sense the love of God for me more and more. I understand better today than years ago and I'm so excited to know that though I'm unworthy and undeserving God sees me as He sees His Son." And I said, "Oh no, brother, that's still not right. You still don't have it yet. I know you're undeserving and so am I; I know you're unworthy and so am I, but the truth of this good Gospel is this—He doesn't see you as unworthy or undeserving any longer. He sees you worthy and deserving of His love because as He is so are you in this world!" When you believe that, perfect love will cast out fear.

Are we truly worthy and deserving of His love? No, not at all! That's why this is so beautiful. We know we are not worthy but because of this blessed doctrine of justification by faith our gracious God views as He views His Son, Jesus, and He is quite worthy and deserving of His Father's love.

2. *Be ambassadors of His love to others.*

There is another way to let perfect love have its work in you. It's in the context here and we'll get to it more in depth two weeks from now. You must be ambassadors of His love to others. It's what John states after verse 19—we must love others. How can you love God whom you don't see when you don't love your brother whom you can see? Christians who are most fearful find it hard to love others. Any act of theirs, which could be seen as an act of love is usually not motivated by love but by performing the proper duty. And they do this because they believe it will put or keep them on God's good side.

Friends, I can't ever get on God's bad side; Jesus has already taken care of that. I am free to love others. Because of God's love for us, we are free to love our brother.

You see, in the end, this perfect love is the true, holy, biblical fear of God. It's to love Him so much

you fear breaking His heart. You fear bringing Him displeasure. You fear because you love Him and do not want to bring one tear to His eye. You do not want to disturb His joy in you. "The joy of the Lord is my strength." What does that mean? As I walk with Him in obedience I know that brings Him joy and gives me strength. When I'm off here in my own will and in rebellion and disobedience there is no strength to my soul and heart, I feel so weak and miserable. Why? Because the perfect love of God has done something to me and I desire to love Him so that I'm afraid of breaking His heart.

God loves us with a perfect love, but unless we rely upon it, it will profit us little. You've got to trust and rely upon it. So I say I am more confident in the love of God than the prospect of death and that's pretty certain. I'm more confident in the love of God than my performance, my prayers and my preaching. I have no confidence in any of this. My ministry is not the reason I shall stand bold before God on that day. Absolutely not! If I had to stand before God on the basis that I preached and prayed and pastored I'd be scared to death. I would be shaking, trembling, frightened, and apprehensive about the Day of Judgment if it rested on my performance, but thank God His perfect love has cast out my fear. I know that's not the basis of God's judgment of me; I know the basis of my judgment is the finished work of Jesus in whom I have been hidden safe. To the extent we experience fear in any portion of our life we deny God's love and fail to trust Him.

I want to conclude by personal illustration. I had been saved for many a year when this occurred. I was saved in 1986 but it was January of 2000 when a great spiritual depression came. I was a preacher before I got saved and was trying to earn my way to heaven, though I would never admit that, not even to myself. I know that's what was going on because I couldn't rest in the grace of God. I just couldn't believe that God would love me. But the day He saved me that's what He did—He just picked me up and loved on me for about an hour, one blessed experience after another, melted down with such joy over the love of God for me that all I could do was weep. I was changed. Brothers and sisters, I can testify that though you've experienced conversion it does not mean you are mature in the love of God. I wasn't.

For years I struggled with this idea of being afraid of God because I wasn't always the perfect son He deserved. I went through seven years of ministry here and things were moving the way I thought they should until God began to dismantle it. All the hopes and plans of my vision were gone. The Lord spoke to me on a January night during one of our services and told me I was building this church on me and that the people of God who were there at that time feared me more than they did Him. For two and a half hours I lay before God weeping and crying and promising I would let go of everything I built in the seven years I was here and if I had to keep it going then I knew it was of Michael and not of God. Because of that, many things, ministries and programs were thrown to the side and people began to leave. The church was down to the size I started with and I cannot tell you how discouraged I was and here is why: I was basing God's love for me on my ministry.

I couldn't see it then, but a year later I saw it. Before this experience I thought, *God must really love me because all these wonderful things were happening.* The church was growing and great things

were happening. We were preparing to build because of running out of space. It seemed God was blessing me so and because He was I was convinced God really did love me. However, when God began to take apart all I had built my only thought was that God didn't love me. If God loved me why would He let this happen? That was the struggle. For a year I labored under the notion that God was against me. I sometimes worried I was not saved. That's how depressed I was until a year later in January, almost to the day, I was in my office after lunch and I cried out again, *Oh God, You've got to help me. I feel like the darkness is overtaking me and I have no light. I don't know which way is up or down. Where are You? Why are You doing this to me?* Immediately, Ephesians 2:8-9 came to my mind. I believe it was God speaking to me.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

With that word came understanding and light shined in the darkness of my soul. I was different. That was 2001. I've struggled since then but I'm getting better. The perfect love of God has cast out the fear I once had of God. I can tell you today that He'll do the same for you if you will believe the Gospel. Child of God, believe the Gospel that saved you from your sins will also save you from your fear. Amen.