

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

1 John 4:17-21

With Study Questions

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Preface: Fear of God

In the third chapter of Romans the Apostle Paul gives us a list of qualities which describe the deplorable condition of fallen humanity.

“As it is written: “There is none righteous, no, not one;¹¹ There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God.¹² They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.”¹³ “Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit”; “The poison of asps is under their lips”;¹⁴ “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.”¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶Destruction and misery are in their ways; ¹⁷And the way of peace they have not known” (Romans 3:10-17).

Paul crescendos in this portrait of fallen humanity with a final observation which is arguably the cause of all the preceding depravity. He simply writes, **“There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:18).**

Abraham

During the journeys of Abraham he found himself traveling through the land of Gerar. You may be familiar with his deceiving of Abimelech regarding Sarah being his wife. When confronted about why he was deceptive, Abraham answered, **“Because I thought, surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will kill me on account of my wife” (Genesis 20:11).** Abraham equated the lack of the fear of God with moral destitution.

The Criminals

We all know Jesus was between two criminals at His crucifixion, one honorable and the other dishonorable, but both guilty. When the dishonorable criminal irreverently requested that Christ use His authority to save the three of them, the other began his rebuke of him, by saying **“Do you not even fear God, 23:40)?**

Wisdom and Fear

The wisdom literature of Proverbs associates the fear of God with many virtues.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7)

“The fear of the LORD is to hate evil” (Proverbs 8:13)

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10)

“The fear of the LORD prolongs days, But the years of the wicked will be shortened” (Proverbs 10:27).

“In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence” (Proverbs 14:26).

“The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life” (Proverbs 14:27)

“The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom” (Proverbs 15:33).

“by the fear of the LORD one departs from evil” (Proverbs 16:6b).

“The fear of the LORD leads to life” (Proverbs 19:23).

“By humility and the fear of the LORD Are riches and honor and life” (Proverbs 22:4).

Fear Not

Having said all this regarding the fear of God, how are we to understand the many admonitions of Jesus to not be afraid? Perhaps the most dramatic example being found in Revelation where John, observing the glorified Christ, explains,

“And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. 18 “I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death” (Revelation 1:17,18).

Reverent Fear

It certainly is the beginning of wisdom, knowledge and a great many things, to have a good healthy, reverent fear of God. John who felt comfortable enough to lay his head upon the bosom of the incarnate Jesus, fell at His feet as dead, when confronted with the glorified Jesus. We ought to pray God would grant us a glimpse of the vision of His venerable, yet imposing majesty that we might tremble a bit and view the cross with greater appreciation. It might keep us from sauntering into the worship of Christ at whatever hour we please, waving to our friends and momentarily putting aside our hot tea just long enough to partake of His body and blood.

I. Vanquishing Fear of Judgment

Nonetheless If fear is the beginning of so many great things, why does Jesus tell His followers not to fear? It must be asserted that there is a certain aspect of fear that should be vanquished in the life of Christians. Jesus alludes to it in the cited Revelation passage and it is the subject of the passage in 1 John. It is the fear of judgment.

“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” (1 John 4:17).

Boldness in Judgment

The work of God’s love in us has as its end, among other things, a confidence in the day of judgment. A fear instilled by God can only be tranquilized by God. We are said, not merely to get by, but to have boldness in the day of judgment. I can be bold before my creditors only when my debt has been paid.

More Than an Accountant

I don’t do my own taxes for fear that I could not properly represent myself if audited. My accountant assures me that my debts are paid in full and promises to stand with me should an audit occur. Therefore my fear is alleviated, but not necessarily removed altogether. The Christians fear of judgment can be removed altogether for their advocate is greater than a mere accountant who makes sure their debts are paid. Our advocate pays the debt Himself. And He, being God, will not come up short in any respect. We can therefore have boldness in the day of judgment. The fear of God is tranquilized by God.

Confidence Attached to Fruit

John finishes this verse by writing “...**because as He is, so are we in this world.**” The confidence Christians are to have cannot be separated from the fruit Christians are to exhibit by their being conformed and conforming to the image of Christ in this world. You may wonder why, as a Christian, you still fear judgment. John provides the explanation.

II. Why Fear Remains

“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” (1 John 4:18).

Something’s Missing

The fear that perfect love casts out is fear of judgment/torment. What John seems to be saying is continual fear of judgment demonstrates the absence of the love of God in a person’s life. And since the unbeliever has no fear of God at all, this seems to be addressed to professing believers. If I might present this as a subjunctive. **“If you believe there is a God and that Jesus is who He claims to be and that there is a judgment day and you have called upon the Name of Jesus to save you, yet still fear the judgment there is something amiss.”** Either your theology is sadly lacking in terms of the gratuitous nature of God’s grace, or you are living a life which somehow makes you feel excluded from those under that grace. I believe the second is what John addresses.

Love Breeds Confidence

“We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

The love we have, whether for God or one another (but probably both) happens, or at least should happen, because He first loved us. If we are feeling excluded from God’s grace and continue to fear judgment (as we all do to some degree) it is due to our lack of love for one another. The tense of the verse could read, “we ought to love,” or “We do love,” (“Him” is implied but not necessary) because He first loved us. Either way, the absence of our love for God and others breeds a sense of alienation and fear of judgment. The presence of love breeds confidence.

Backing into the passage so far: God loves us, resulting in our love for Him and each other, resulting in a confidence before the judgment seat of God.

III. Without Love

If there is any doubt as to my interpretation, I think the gavel hits the table in verse twenty.

“If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20)?

No Love = Fear of Judgment

Love for God cannot be separated from our love of each other. You have both or neither. We can assume, therefore, that when one doesn't love his brother, he doesn't love God and therefore will fear judgment.

Mustard Seed Love

Here we see a bit of a head on collision between biblical Christianity and twenty-first century Western Evangelical easy-believism. We are all quick to warn our brothers that without faith it is impossible to please God (quick to add that a mustard seed worth will suffice.) But we are reticent to say without love for the brethren it is impossible to please God (we can even add the mustard seed quantifier if necessary.)

Works Righteousness?

Is this a works righteousness (i.e., saved by works)? Absolutely not! John is not promoting the idea that a level of love must be attained before the blood of Christ can be applied. What John is saying is that when the blood of Christ is applied it will yield love for God and for others. And if that is nonexistent in one's life, it is tantamount to faith being nonexistent in one's life. Fear of judgment therefore remains. John finishes with a simple statement.

“And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (1 John 4:21).

Not Optional

Genuine love for God, a love that removes fear of judgment, must be accompanied by the love of others. Loving others is not optional for Christians.

A Message For Me/You

And let me add this from a very subjective point of view. Every person I have ever met who was committed to this type of Christian love has never been overly critical of the love of others, because it simply wasn't the focus of their lives. So the message is to me and to you. It is not for the person you wish were present to hear it. If you are a Christian, you ought to love others.

Questions for Study

1. Discuss the fear of God. What kinds of qualities does it produce in people?
2. In what respect should Christian remain fearful?
3. In what respect should fear be vanquished?
4. Who is the only one who can remove a fear instilled by God?
5. How can a person have boldness in judgment?
6. Perfect love casts out the fear of what?
7. Why would someone who claims to be a Christian have a continual fear of judgment?
8. How necessary is love for one another?
9. Does loving one another save a person's soul?
10. What can a Christian expect to happen if they exercise love for others?