

## Fearless Confidence in God's Love

### 1 John 4:13-18

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Two years ago I had the opportunity to do a Footsteps of Paul tour with a group from our church. We went to the ancient cities of Philippi, Corinth, and several others. One stop was the ancient city of Ephesus in modern day Turkey.

The ancient city has had a major archaeological facelift and is visited by thousands of people every day. We got off our bus to begin the walking tour. Like many tourist spots, there are all kinds of shops selling every manner of touristy item.

There was one shop whose sign definitely called for a photo:



It's ironic that this store is part of the ancient city of Ephesus. It was the church in Ephesus which Jesus gave this very icy judgment, *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.* (Revelation 2:4)

The Church of Ephesus was pastored by John. It was this same general community to which John wrote 1 John urging them toward true and genuine faith. Jesus said, *You have abandoned the love you had at first.* They still had the outward form, but their hearts were not truly there.

They were genuine fake watches. You've seen these watches haven't you? You can buy them on the streets of Chicago or any major city. It says Gucci or Rolex. It looks like a Rolex, it says it's a Rolex, but it is no Rolex which is why you can buy it for \$15.

In John's church and in our church and in every church, there are genuine fake watch-like people. They look like a Christian. They say they are a Christian. But John is urging us to realize that look and talk are not good indicators of genuine salvation.

One of the challenges of studying 1 John is that he circles around and around thematically, often saying similar things again for emphasis. Our passage today is a bit of a summary of what he has already said but with one particular golden nugget that I want to concentrate on.

*By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because 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. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 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. (1 John 4:13-16)*

Verses 17-18 are where we are going to spend our time but let me just make a few comments on the previous verses. Again, John argues for objective and subjective evidences of genuine salvation. *By this we know that we abide in him.* His answer? We have the Holy Spirit. He doesn't say how we know if we have the Spirit or not. It could infer more miraculous expressions of spiritual gifts. More likely though, he's referring to the normal evidences of the Holy Spirit, what we call the fruit of the Spirit. It is unfortunate when Christians sensationalize the presence of the Holy Spirit and insist on the exceptional expressions instead of the normal ones. It's like the people who looked at the rare super moon this week but pay the normal moon no attention at all. The normal evidences of the Spirit are *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control.* (Galatians 5:22-23)

These are quite subjective qualities. That is why he balances them with the objective claim to truth in 1 John 4:14 regarding his own apostolic witness to the fact that Jesus was sent by the Father and is the Son of God and is the Savior of the world. That is objective propositional truth which must be personally believed. Verse 15 says, *Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him.* So we see the objective/subjective partnership. I may have spiritual and religious experiences but if they are apart from the required confession of Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world, I am merely an **enthusiast**. If on the other hand, I make claims to believe in Jesus, but there is no evidence of Spirit change in my life, I am merely a **ritualist**. Both are genuine fake watches. The true Christian confesses Jesus as Savior AND as a byproduct of regeneration, show signs of spiritual life and transformation.

The most important sign is love. That's verse 16. He repeats what he said in 4:8, *God is love.* The defining quality of all that God does is to *give of himself for the good and joy of others.* Like Father, like Son. If we are sons of this eternally loving heavenly Father, the quintessential quality of a genuine believer will be love. Love for God. Love for others. These are not just the two Great Commandments but the two great characteristics of a true Christian. We display them very imperfectly. But still we have to ask, how do we evidence these characteristics in our lives? What would those who know you well say about your claim to saving faith based on the quality of your love for people?

John keeps going back to this. Love. God's love for us. Our love for God. Our love for one another. This is not to forget the effects of sin in our nature and in the church. This is not a utopic vision of a local church. John was well aware of the failings of genuine Christians and urges in 1:9 that we confess those failures to God and receive ongoing forgiveness. So he's not requiring flawless love, but he is requiring the presence of it.

This brings us to verse 18 and our focus today: *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.*

Fear. How is that for a descriptive word for the human condition? Summarizes a lot, doesn't it? We have so much to fear. We fear rejection, poverty, cancer, unemployment, birthdays, old age, pain, heights, public speaking, small places, snakes, marriage, divorce, political turmoil, tax increases, things that go bump in the night, terrorist attacks, being alone, crowds, and really almost anything. What are you most afraid of?

It's safe to say, the greatest human fear is death. We really don't want to die. Further, we fear the other side of the grave that awaits us—the Christian and biblical teaching of two very different destinies—eternal life and heaven with God or eternal death and punishment in hell. Jesus told us to not fear the one who can cause us physically to die but fear the one who can sentence us to eternal death (Matthew 10:28).

John continues to draw contrasts—light and darkness; truth and falsehood; love and hate—the qualities of those who are experiencing spiritual life through Christ and those who are not. We add this to the list: fear versus love. John says that they are mutually exclusive. Where fear reigns, love is not present. Where love is present, fear is not. For those of us who struggle with fears and anxieties, this may become your favorite verse, but only if we understand what it is really saying.

### **How Love (God's) Overcomes Fear (Ours)**

In case you wonder if this is what John is trying to say, look at the strength of the second clause, *but perfect love casts out fear*. The Greek word there is the word for throw or hurl. It's like in the old westerns when someone doesn't pay the bill or makes the owner mad, all of a sudden out of the doors he comes flying and lands in the street. That is the sense of it. Love grabs fear and throws it out. The NEB translates it, *There is no room for fear in love*. The love of God can and will crush our natural fears. How does it do that?

### **All human fear is ultimately eschatological, meaning we are afraid of the future**

All fear is indirectly a fear of eternal punishment. I cannot be afraid of the past, I am afraid of the future. It might be one second in the future, but fear is future oriented. It's like a map of the rivers and streams of North America; they wander and meander but they all eventually flow into the ocean. Today's river is tomorrow's ocean. I have little fears, Little Calumet river type fears, but they are ultimately fears of the future. I have bigger fears, Ohio River level fears, which also flow toward future fear. My really big, Mississippi River fears appear to be in Illinois but they really flow toward the ocean of future fear.

Trace the fear you have. Ridicule. Cancer. Unemployment. Whatever. They are all about the future and uncertainty there. John says the really big one we have and should have is eternal damnation. All fears big and small flow toward my very finite ability to know and control the future tomorrow and my future eternity. He writes in verse 18, *fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love*. So fear feeds on what I cannot know or control in the future and the impending eternal judgment of God.

### **God's love assures us that our future fears are misleading; he will always love us**

*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.* (1 John 4:18)

Remember, *God is love*. Since he is eternal, his love is not subject to change or circumstance. Human love is not this way. Human love is fickle and circumstantial. Think of all the divorces explained by this statement, *I don't love her anymore*. Our loves are fickle.

Our loves are also circumstantial. Circumstances beyond our control can dictate our experience of love. Soldiers are gone to war and cannot be home with their family. That's why we cry when we see the surprise reveal that Daddy or Mommy's home. You've seen these, right? The little girl throws out the first pitch to the catcher, the catcher takes off his mask, and it's Daddy! Even the newscasters tear up. Why? Circumstances take loved ones away. Death separates us from the experience of loving someone.

But God's love is not fickle. He IS Love. God's love is not circumstantial; he is sovereign over all circumstances. He is sovereign over time and transcends time. We look into the future and everything is dark. God looks into the future and everything is bright, known, controlled, purposed, and determined toward an ultimate end of our eternal salvation and his glory. When God says he loves you, it is a kind of love so different from our love. It is perfect love. It is completed love. It is love in its fullness and divine perfection. *Perfect love casts out fear.* God's love toward us is perfect and therefore throws our fear out of the saloon. Even death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:39)

### **God's Reassurances: The Cross (Past Love) and His promises (Future Love)**

This is the logic of Romans 5:8 and 8:32,

- *But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* (Romans 5:8)
- *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?* (Romans 8:32)

Both of these look back to the cross as assurance of God's love. If he loved us enough to die for us when we were his enemies, how must he love us now? If he didn't spare Jesus but gave him up for us, how will he not continue to love us and meet our needs? If we realize that these actions of God flow from his absolute commitment to love us forever, not only do we not fear eternal punishment, because all fear is of the future, we will not dread anything else either.

Therefore, in our battle with fear, we must look back to the cross as God's eternal statement of commitment to loving us, saving us, forgiving us, and giving to us eternal life.

Try that. What are you afraid of? \_\_\_\_\_. Think about that fear and bring to mind a mental picture of Jesus. Jesus the Son of God. Jesus the fellow man. Jesus hanging there. Jesus bleeding. Jesus struggling. Jesus dying. Jesus crying out, "It is finished!" God bleeding and dying to save me. Now think again of your boss, final exam, upcoming surgery, whatever. Perfect love casts out fear. The cross is love's perfection; it is Jesus' "I love you." He gave himself for my good, joy, and eternal salvation.

### **God's love produces fearless confidence for the future**

*When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.* (Psalm 56:3)

John wants us to live fearlessly. Scripture calls us to a holy boldness. *If God is for us, who can be against us?* (Romans 8:31) *I will never leave you nor forsake you.* (Hebrews 13:5) The words Jesus said in Scripture more than any other are, *Fear not.* (Matthew 10:31 and many others) This is not psychological mumbo jumbo. This confidence in the future is a confidence in the one who died for us and promised to save us to the uttermost.

We read verses like Psalm 56:3, *When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.* That's comforting, but what am I actually doing? I am trusting God. But what do I trust? I trust his promises to

love me beyond any and every circumstance of my life. The more I rest in God's perfect love for me, the less afraid I will be. *When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.* No matter what, he will always love me. Fear doubts God's intent to love. Fear doubts God's promise to love. Fear acts as if God isn't love or isn't there or isn't able to sustain me.

Over the next 20 years of my life, I don't know how many sermon illustrations I am going to use that somehow relate to my daughter. This is what I do know; here is the first one.

I have been a dad for three weeks. I remember our first night at home. No nurses. No doctors. Kiralee is in the cradle in the room with us. We put her down to sleep for the night. We went to bed. It wasn't long before she made a sound like "Eh!" Up out of bed we jump right to her side wondering if she is okay. She was fine. We did that, it would seem, a hundred times that night.

But now we have come to identify a pattern in this little girl. She starts with little snorts and noises. These are a sign of things to come. The snorts start coming faster. Then she starts to wail her arms. We call her our little thrasher. She thrashes. Then she contorts her face and lets out a blood curdling scream. Then the screams and convulsing roll.

I have seen this now for three weeks. As she goes into her little routine even in my arms, I have thought to myself, does Kiralee realize how much we love her? Does she begin to realize how committed we are to meeting her every need? This crying is absolutely illogical IF she knew our love for her. If there was some way to drop into her fear, one drop of the ocean of our love for her, what would happen to the screams and the thrashing and the convulsing?

What a picture of us, God's children. Life comes at us and overwhelms us. It looks like we are losing and the trial is winning. We begin to waver (snort). If the trial continues, we start to spiritually thrash. The arms and legs of our faith are gyrating in displeasure. From somewhere deep down comes a primal fear and a terror and a cry.

How God must look down on us, like I do my daughter, and wish that we could realize how much he loves us; how strong and powerful he is to protect us; how infinite his resources are to meet our needs; how eternally committed he is to our joy and our salvation. If we could for but a moment feel in our hearts a drop of the ocean of his love for us, his perfect love would drive away all of our fears.

What are you afraid of? What could you be facing or fearing that confidence in God's total and perfect love for you could not take away? Perfect love casts out fear.

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