



When we are in relationships where fear is a large factor, we hinder ourselves from love. Think of a parent-child relationship. If your child were to clean up the house and when you thanked them, they said, “Well, I did it because I didn’t want you to keep nagging me about doing the chores,” what would you think? Is that love? If they said, “I know you have a lot of power and if I didn’t do what’s right, you’d crush me; so, I just kept things the way they are.” Do you want your kids to think that way about you? It’s true you’re much stronger than they are. It’s true that disobedience is wrong and it’s true they could get a consequence because of their disobedience. It’s true that good parents will continue to teach children how they ought to live (that’s not nagging, by the way, but kids might feel it that way). But you don’t want your children responding to you out of self-protection and annoyance. You want them to respond to you because they know your goodness and your love. Right?

The same is true for God. I’m reminded of the psalmist that says, **“Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.”**¹⁰ **Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord.**¹ The wicked are like horses and mules who only obey because they’re curbed in some way for clear self-benefit. God doesn’t want that. That’s not real obedience. But notice the difference between the wicked and righteous. The steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts the Lord. If you live your life depending on the Lord and obeying him, you’re doing that because you are surrounded by God’s love. You know he loves you and therefore, you love him and obey him. Do you see the difference? You’re not motivated by a terror that God will zap you with lightning like Zeus in Greek mythology. You’re not motivated by terror that God is going to send you to Hell. You’re motivated by the fact that God so loved you that he sent his Son to this world to take your punishment and reconcile you to him. You’re motivated by the fact that God has adopted you into his family and loves you eternally and extravagantly. You’re motivated by the fact that God has given you the fullness of himself forever – and he is the fountain of all that is good, beautiful and best (in and of himself)!

So, are you motivated to obey out of fear or out of love? How do you relate to God? I ask this because this is exactly the direction John goes in the five verses we’re looking at this morning. John’s been comforting a group of Christians who have been torn apart by people who have denied Jesus and stated that they’re the spiritual ones – not these Christians. The audience is hurting and confused, and John writes to give *them* assurance in God’s love for them and also writes to showcase that their actions of love serves as an additional sign that they truly are God’s – because those who love the believers can only do so by God’s grace in them.

Remember that John wants to grow the Christian’s assurance. And, as I said last week, there is a difference between assurance of salvation and actually being saved. You can lack assurance, and still be a Christian because your salvation is not dependent on how confident you are. It’s dependent on Jesus.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 32:9–10.

That said, growing in assurance leads to greater joy and freedom in the Christian life. So, last week, we talked about the three blessings that God gives to genuine Christians to grow them in their assurance. Today, we'll take a step back, and here John emphasizes the marks of perfect love to be seen in a genuine Christian. So, the main idea today is that **The marks of perfect love are confidence before God and love for our brothers and sisters.** When I say the marks of perfect love, I'm not talking about the marks of our love. I'm talking about the marks that reveal that God's perfect love are at work in a person. So, what I'm going to do this morning is simply take this main idea and break it up into three sections, and then we'll go verse-by-verse through 1 John 4:17-21. Let's start with:

1. The marks of perfect love. . . (v. 17a)

What does this mean? Let's read verse 17 again: ¹⁷By this is love perfected with us, so that. . .² We're going to stop here. Start with the first two words: by this. By what? What is John referencing? He's referring us back to the previous verse. In verse 16, John is emphasizing that they all are abiding in God's love and God abides in us. Again, if you have recognized your brokenness and sinfulness, and you have gone to God for grace alone through Jesus alone, then not only has God forgiven you, but God is close with you and you are close with him. You abide in his *love!* Do you hear that? You don't abide in his toleration of us. You don't abide in his displeasure of you. You don't abide in his allowance of us. You abide in his *love.*

Now we get to verse 17, and John says, "By *this*" is love perfected with us. By this abiding-in-God's-love relationship, love is perfected with us! Now, what does it mean when he says that "love is perfected with us?" He doesn't say, "love is perfected *in* us." It's that love is perfected *with* us. I actually wish it was translated as "among" us. That's faithful to the Greek, and so if you want, write that word off to the side in your Bible. The point is that God's love in us individually, as we commune with him and experience his love, we together as a church will grow in God's love together, and God's love will be perfected among us, in our midst.

Let's now move on to another question to answer in this phrase. What does "perfected" mean? Some may think that John is saying that in this life, we will as a church can become perfect in love. Do you think that's what John is saying? Can we ever find a perfect church? A church where everyone perfectly does everything they're supposed to in loving and caring for one another? Absolutely not. I agree with the phrase that if you think you've found the perfect church, watch out because you just entered it! We know we're not perfect; so, what does John mean by the word "perfected"? Aren't we disagreeing with the Bible if we say John isn't saying perfect? No. For two reasons: 1) the word "perfected," in the Greek, can also be translated as matured. Maturity doesn't mean sinless. 2) clearly the tense usage here reveals a process of growth in maturity and "perfection."

Finally, we have one more phrase to notice here: so that. The reason we need to notice the "so that" is because John clearly is telling us that God has a goal for us in giving us his love. His love must affect us. This is an important point in John's teaching here because the false teachers believed that you could trust Jesus and not be affected in your life. How you lived your life didn't matter. But John says that if anyone thinks that way, they've missed God's love completely. When you know God's love, and because you're abiding in his love, you will be affected. God's love is not a mere concept or theory. His love is real and life-changing. Moving from this "so that," we can then see two markers of God's love being perfected through us. The first is:

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:17.

2. . . .confidence before God. . . (vv. 17b-19)

Let's read the rest of verse 17 through 19: 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.³

Why does God abide with us in his love? The first reason John gives is so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment. Can we just stop here? Have you ever had situations in your life where you were reminded of a sin in your life and condemnation filled you? I've had situations where I'm dreaming that I've done something wrong and I wake up with such intense fear and I have to tell myself that it's not real! Anyone else had those situations before? But when it comes to the judgment before God, we're told that all must give an account before God – even for every thoughtless word. This judgment will be very specific and all-encompassing. God also judges the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. Every human being will be fully exposed before the God to whom we must give an account.

If I can feel fear because of a dream where I did something wrong and am being judged. Or, if I can feel like this over *one* sin in the past. What must the future judgment be like? What will it be like for you? Will God judge you purely on the basis of your works? John has said in this letter that Jesus was judged in the place of sinners, and if you have turned to him, his death has taken the punishment you deserved. So that now, you are filled in God's love, and as a result, you do not have confidence that you will be judged and condemned. Instead, you can have confidence (meaning, assurance and welcome) in the day of judgment!

Think of this even more. Think of the times when God appeared to people in different ways in the Old Testament. Through a storm on Mt. Sinai and Moses had to be hid in the rock or he'd be destroyed. Through the angel of the Lord appearing to Joshua and Joshua falling on his face in fear. Through Isaiah's vision of the Lord in the heavenly temple and Isaiah tells God to send his wrath on him.

These visions of God caused immense fear because it caused the people to see who they were in comparison to the utter perfection of God. But John says that God abides with us in love so that we will look forward to the judgment! God desires that we would be confident in the judgment. God wants our assurance to grow in being confident. This is not arrogance to be confident if we are trusting Christ and abiding in God's love. Christian, you and I will stand and make it through and be welcomed by God in the future judgment! But why will we stand? We have many reasons that John has already given in this letter. Primarily because of his love in that Jesus became the wrath-appeaser on our behalf. But here, John uses a very intriguing phrase. He says, "because as he is so also are we in this world."⁴ What does that mean? The "he" is clearly referring to Jesus. So John says that as Jesus is now in Heaven so we Christians are, too, in this world. In what way are we like Jesus right now? I think this takes us back to the beginning to chapter 3, where John says, "**Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.**"⁵ We are God's children now, and we anticipate Jesus' return because then we'll be perfectly perfect, just like Jesus. But as we wait for that complete perfection, we are sons and daughters

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:17–19.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:17.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:2.

even today. Therefore, I think John is speaking to our special status. God will not condemn any one of his sons or daughters. When Jesus returns for us, that's not a time when we better watch out because Dad's coming to punish us. No. We better be watching because that's when our Savior is coming to unite us with our Father and experience his neverending love and grace.

This reality of our future confidence at the judgment should remove all sense of fear in serving God because you don't serve him so that he won't be angry. You don't serve him so that you prove you're sorry. You don't serve him because you don't want him to discipline you. You serve him because he loves you and you love him. This is exactly what John says next: ¹⁸There 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. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us.⁶

Fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not be perfected in love. Look at those words. Evaluate how you live. I have worked alongside many people in trying to help them fight sin and serve the Lord, and one of the most basic recommendations I give to them when moving forward is to confess when they're struggling or when they've sinned. Why do I do this? Because Ephesians says that whatever comes to the light becomes light. Meaning, when you come out to the open and are transparent, God will renew and restore you. But do you know how difficult it is for many people to do this? I've had various relationships where I've asked someone, "How are you doing," and their response is, "I did it again." And I say something like, "Why didn't you tell me you did?" Or, "Why didn't you reach out beforehand?" Do you know one of the answers I've heard or felt from people? They fear condemnation. Will they be rejected or shamed by me? So, they don't speak and bring to the light.

Let me ask you a question, "Who wants you to live in shame and feelings of rejection?" Satan. Who wants you to face your shame and sin and move on? God. So, shame isn't bad. But it's how we deal with it. Are you going to come to the light or stay in the darkness? I would say that if you keep hiding your sin or trying to take care of it yourself without transparency, you have not been perfected in God's love. You aren't assured of his love. Fear has to do with punishment. By the way, this word for punishment isn't simply saying you are disciplined out of love. This idea is condemnation or rejection. If you feel that from God, then you haven't been perfected in his love. Now, why is John saying this to his audience? He's talking about those false teachers. They don't obey out of love. But, there also seems to be a reality that these individuals might have fear and questions, and John is encouraging them to grow in God's love for them. They don't need to have fear. They can lay aside the judgment they experienced from the false teachers and they can move forward in God's perfect love!

After all, John says "there is no fear in love," and "We love because he first loved us." Let's get back to the basics, Ventura. **God has loved us first, most, and best. Will you trust him? Do you believe him? Are you communing with God in his love?** Let his love wash away fear and condemnation, melting your heart and compelling you towards genuine love-motivated obedience. This moves us to the second marker:

3. . . .love for our brothers and sisters. (vv. 20-21)

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:18–19.

John says in verses 20-21, “²⁰If 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. ²¹And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”⁷

John begins with the negative, which confronts people who are like the false teachers who think that loving fellow Christians are optional. Maybe there’s someone here who might think this way. First off, “hate” here doesn’t have to mean you want to murder them. John moves forward to say “he who does not love his brother.” To not love is to hate, according to John.

Moving forward, notice the word “brother.” It literally refers to a familial context with brothers and sisters. This is family. That’s why, Ventura, we often refer to our church as a family. We’re children of God and siblings with each other. If you hate your family – all your brothers and sisters. If you do not love each other here, you’re a liar.

Get the importance of this. Four times in this letter, John confronts people by calling them liars. 1 John 1:6 says, “⁶If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie. . . .”⁸ Chapter 2 and verse 4 reaffirms this: “⁴Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar. . . .”⁹ In 2:22 we hear, “²²Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?”¹⁰ Then we have the verses here. John confronts the moral, doctrinal, and then here the social ramifications of knowing Jesus.

If someone wants to confront John and say, “I don’t have to love if I love God,” John says “for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has seen.” John is arguing from easy to more difficult. It ought to be more difficult to love a Being you cannot see. How do you commune with someone you can’t see? How do you talk to them? How do you serve them, listen to them? It’s much easier to talk to and commune with flesh and blood. Therefore, to say you “love” God, but you don’t love your brothers and sisters has to be a lie. Look around, Ventura. Do you see real people? Do you know that each person here has real needs and hurts and joys and trials and dreams? Do you know God not only created them in his image, but he has welcomed them as his children? Your Father is also their Father and he loves them. Because he loves you, and he loves them; you ought to want to love them, too.

Think of it this way. In our day, I’ve heard so many people so often speak negatively about Christians. It’s a consistent message of putting down the church and all of its failures. And, believe me, I get it. There are a lot of professing Christians who are not imaging Jesus in this world. But some people seem to have a vitriole against God’s children. Have you embraced that kind of tone? If you have children and you had someone babysit your children, and when you returned, the babysitter said, “Wow, your kids are needy and very annoying. They definitely don’t listen well and I just can’t believe they’re *your* kids. You’re amazing, but they’re jerks!” Would you invite that babysitter again? No. Why? They weren’t loving *your kids as your kids*. What about God’s children?

So, let’s backtrack on what John’s been saying. You, who deserve God’s condemnation, instead have received an abiding relationship with God in his love. You have received, and continue to receive, grace

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:20–21.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 1:6.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 2:4.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 2:22.

so that you can have confidence in the face of judgment and so that we together can be perfected in God's love. As such, we then love one another because we share God's perfect love with each other.

This is ultimately Christ's command. Jesus told his disciples in many places about his command to love, and John reiterates it here: whoever loves God must love his brother. This is a privilege. In loving one another, we grow in being perfected in God's love.

I can resonate with this. I remember years ago, struggling within ministry here at Ventura and one time I was talking with Ben Jacques saying that sometimes I have a fear that people might reject me if they found out more about me. Ben said to me very clearly and emphatically that he can't imagine anything I could do that would keep him from loving me. In that moment, the love of God moved from Ben to me, and I've never forgotten that. That's just one example, but it was so needed for me. This committed kind of God-like love can flow through us to one another. So, what does application look like for you?

Maybe you're still struggling with rejoicing in God's love for you. Maybe you need to pray for God give you ideas of how you can love each other. But whatever you do, don't do nothing today. **The marks of perfect love are confidence before God and love for our brothers and sisters. We have God's love. His love overflows in our lives to give us confidence before his judgment. Let it flow also into others and watch how God perfects his love in us together!**