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1 John 4:17-21 “The Work of Mature Love”

Intro. This evening we continue John’s lengthy treatment of the subject of love. This is my third message on the subject of love from chapter 4. It is as if John is holding up for us the beautiful diamond called love, and he slowly turns it to show each facet of its sparkling beauty. Should we continue week by week to preach on the subject of the love of God, I would not exhaust all that we could learn of His love.

In this passage he tells us some things that the love of God does for us and through us. Indeed, true love is active, not idle. God’s love is dynamic. It produces fruits in our lives. In this passage there are two main fruits of God’s love: First of all, we will have boldness or confidence instead of fear in our relationship with God. Secondly, God’s love within us will cause us to love *all* of our fellow believers.

Yet notice that it is “perfect love” that will produce these fruits. All of us have love to some degree and in some form, even if it is no more than natural affection (cf. Luke 6:32). But do we have “perfect love”? Back in v.12 the idea of “perfect love” was introduced to us. I pointed out to you that such love is not love that is absolutely perfect, but “perfected” in the sense that God’s love accomplishes the purpose God had in giving us His love. “Perfect love” refers to love which is complete in all its parts, which has reached its complete development.

Now vv.16b-18 tell us what perfect love will do *for* the believer, and vv.19-21 tells us what perfect love will do *through* the believer to others. So let’s see what perfect love will do in and through our lives. First of all:

I. BOLDNESS TOWARD GOD IS PRODUCED

Vv. 17-18 tells us how love, or the lack of it, relates to our future. Hebrews 9:27 says, “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” Does that verse make you feel uneasy, or will you face judgment with confidence? In fact, there are two ways people approach their meeting with God: we will either approach Him with fear and dread, or with boldness and confidence. Let’s consider:

A. The Possibility of Boldness – In v.17 John says, “Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment...” John says here that we can have boldness toward God, even in the Day of Judgment! The word translated “boldness” [*parrhesia*] literally refers to someone who speaks freely. Thus, it expresses boldness of speech, or having confidence and assurance as you speak to someone, or as you face them. John says we can have confidence and assurance as we face God’s judgment, knowing that everything is right between you and God.

Back when you were in school, you can probably remember facing a major exam. If you studied hard and were well prepared, you faced the exam with boldness and confidence. But if not, you faced it with fear and dread.

Likewise, we will face the judgment seat of Christ someday. Will you do so with confidence that you will receive some reward? Or if you remain an unbeliever, you will face the

Great White Throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). Heb. 10:31 says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." So will you face that judgment with boldness, or with fear? Here, John says we can face God's judgment with boldness!

But how is this possible? Well notice:

B. The Ground of Such Boldness - We can only have boldness before God if the following are true:

1. Evidence of God's Love in Us – Look at the last of v.12, "If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us." If we love one another we show that God truly lives within, and His love has fulfilled its purpose in us. Now tie that in with v.17, "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment...." We will have boldness when the time comes because we've seen perfect love manifested in our lives.

2. Identification with Christ – John says in the last of v.17 that we have boldness "because as He is, so are we in this world." What does John mean? Surely this means that there is a vital connection between Christ and the believer. So if we are "in Christ," then we may expect God to deal with us in the same manner as God deals with His own Son. Is Jesus condemned? He was by men but not by God! He was exalted to the right hand of God. Even so, by our connection to Jesus, we shall not be condemned. Why is that? Our sin was imputed to Jesus on the cross, and He bore judgment in our place. Then, His righteousness has been imputed to us. We can have boldness because we shall have a perfect answer to all accusations on account of our sins: Rom. 8:34 says, "Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us." John 3:18 says, "He who believes in Him is not condemned...."

This verse not only points to our position in Christ, but also to our likeness to Christ. We know we are in Christ when we are like Christ. The reference is not to any one attribute, as love or righteousness, but to the whole character of Christ as it is made known. Resembling Him, we need not be alarmed at the prospect of meeting Him.

John implies that this likeness is a present reality for the true believer. John is not exhorting; he is affirming. So we represent Christ here. Many people will not learn of Jesus from this Book. They must learn of Jesus by seeing Him manifested in our lives. But what a ghastly contradiction the lives of multitudes of professing Christians are to that plain statement! The world has for its illustrations of the gospel the lives of us Christian people. That is what you are set to do in this world. Christ has entrusted His reputation to us, and many a man that never cares to look at Him as He is revealed in Scripture, would be wooed and won to look at Him and love Him, if we Christian people were more true to our calling.

Now let's move on to the second fruit of perfect love:

II. FEAR IS CAST OUT

John says in v.18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear...." Of course, fear in this context is the opposite of boldness before God. And we must understand this in its context of judgment. John does not have in mind the fear a person might have before a public speaking assignment. It is mainly fear in our relationship to God, in the face of judgment.

I remember using this verse to try to calm my fear before preaching or giving a testimony, but I was taking it out of context. Thus, I don't think I was helped by reciting that verse. I still had fear in my heart before I spoke in the early days of my ministry.

So notice a few truths about this fear that is cast out:

A. Fear Can Be a Present Reality – When John says in the last of v.18, "...he who fears," he uses a present participle, "the one fearing." Thus, he is referring to a present reality, a real fear that many people have *now*, before the judgment. Heb. 2:15 speaks of the "fear of death" which many people have. Even a believer can have a sense of fear, when they focus upon their sin and shortcomings. But mature love removes it.

Do you fear death? Do you love His appearing, as Paul did (2 Tim. 4:8), or would you dread the thought of Jesus' return? Your answer says a lot about your spiritual condition.

B. Fear Is Caused by Sin and Guilt - The fear of which John speaks of is not the reverence of a son, which is proper, but the dread of the criminal or of a slave (Rom. 8:15). Fear is a shrinking apprehension of the harm that we suspect may come to us. God, who ought to be our dearest joy and most ardent desire, becomes our ghastliest dread. The root of such an unnatural perversion of all that a person ought to feel toward his or her loving Creator lies in the simple consciousness of sin.

Do you remember what happened after Adam and Eve sinned? They hid themselves from God. Why did they do that? In Gen. 3:10 Adam said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." He was afraid because he had disobeyed God, and God had warned of the judgment of death for disobedience. Fear came when sin entered in this world.

On the other hand, the man who is alienated from God has reason to be afraid, even if he does not sense that fear. That's the problem in today's society. God's moral law is no longer taught, and many ignore what little consciousness of sin that they have. They don't want to feel guilty about anything even when they should. Rom. 3:18 says, "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Now we should desire to be free of the fear of God's judgment when you consider the fact that:

C. Fear Causes Torment – In v.18 John says, "...fear involves torment...." The word translated "torment" [*kolasis*] normally refers to punishment (as in Mt. 25:46) or the penalty of doing wrong. John literally says, "fear has punishment." But here, this "torment" is the dread of punishment, and it is a form of punishment in itself. Indeed, some people are tormented in their soul because they dread facing the judgment of God. This is just one form of suffering which comes from disharmony with God.

For example, I feel sorry for those who have a works salvation. They never know if they have done enough, and they always have this gnawing fear that in the end they will not be saved.

Therefore, we should be interested in what is promised in our text:

D. Such Fear Can Be Removed! – Fear of divine displeasure and punishment is a real problem, even for some Christians. But it should not be for the Christian. So John says in v.18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.... But he who fears has not been made perfect in love." There is only one wise thing to do, and that is to get rid of the occasion of dread,

which is the fact and consciousness of sin. The one way to get deliverance is to go to Jesus Christ. Take all your sin to Him. We have no fear of judgment in light of Jn. 5:24, which says, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.” Rom. 8:1 says, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

In a general sense love and fear are mutually exclusive; and this is because fear implies punishment, a thing utterly alien to the desire of love. Because God loved us, He sent Jesus to save us from our sin. So if fear is present, it is evidence that perfected love is absent. Perfect love casts our fear because perfect love understands the love of God. If a man had perfect love to God, he would have no fear of anything—for what would he have to dread? He would have no fear of death, for he would have nothing to dread beyond the grave. It is guilt which makes people fear what is to come.

How can we know that we have perfect love? This will be answered in my last point, which is the last fruit of perfect love I will talk about:

III. LOVE FOR ALL IS PRODUCED

Isn't that the ideal we should desire? Isn't that the kind of love that is God-like? How can we have that kind of love? Well consider with me:

A. The Cause of Our Love – In v.19 John says, “We love *Him* because He first loved us.” Likewise, v.10 says, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us...” The verb “we love” in v.19 is without an object in our best Greek texts, whether God or man. This is furthermore required by what follows, where it is falsely urged that the claims of love can be satisfied by bare love for God. Our love is derived from the love of God.

Mark Pierce was a great English preacher. A young lady came to him and said, “Brother Pierce, I am having a problem.” And he said, “What is it, young lady?” “I do not love God as I ought to love Him. I know I should love Him, I wish I did, but I just do not love God as I should. I am trying to love Him, I want to love Him, I know I ought to love Him and yet I do not love Him as I ought.” The great preacher, Dr. Pierce, said to her, “Young lady, I will tell you what you do. You go back home and forget about loving God and instead begin to think about how much God loves you. Meditate upon it and think about it and mull over it and say it to yourself over and over again, ‘God loves me. God loves me. God really loves me.’” The next week she came back to the meeting and said, “Oh, Brother Pierce, I did what you told me to do and the more I thought about how much God loves me, the more love welled up in my heart, the more I began to love God.” Indeed, just as John says in v.19, “We love Him because he first loved us.”

So if you want to love God more, you need to dwell more upon how much God loves you.

B. The Contradiction of True Love – In v.20 John says, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar...” Notice that it is not, “If someone loves God,” but, if someone *says*, “I love God.” God loved us even when we were enemies because of sin. How can we say that we love God, and have the love of God, if we hate anyone?

Then he gives a reason for his statement in the last of v.20, “for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” It is more reasonable to expect that we should love one whom we have seen and known personally, than that we

should love one whom we have not seen. The apostle is arguing from human nature as it is. Furthermore, John is not speaking here of hating an enemy, but of hating a brother! The title “brother” refers to a Christian and brings out the idea of that which is godlike in man. If a professed Christian, therefore, does not love one who bears the Divine image, whom he sees and knows, how can he love God whom he has not seen? How can you claim to love God and not love His children? God loves everyone and we should do the same.

Some might respond, “That’s the problem; I’ve seen him and know what he’s like!” But such a love is immature, and not perfect the way God wants us to have. Remember, God’s love is unconditional. He knew all your faults and yet He loved you (Rom. 5:8). We should follow His example and have unconditional love for others. I don’t care how obnoxious another Christian may seem, God still lives in him. Don’t say you love God but hate another believer.

I am afraid that we are entering a new era of conflict within the ranks of Christians, and Southern Baptists in particular. I see generational conflict. I’ve seen a faithful servant of God attacked and humiliated in order to further an agenda. Paul warned in Gal. 5:15, “But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!” If we do not practice love and forgiveness toward our brothers and sisters in Christ, how can we claim to love God?

We have seen that the test of a true believer is love for all and hatred for none, especially one who professes to be a Christian. So let’s see how John concludes this text with:

C. The Command to Love – In v.21 John says, “And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.” The commandment of love which has been implied in the preceding verses is now defined. The word “that” (*hina*) gives more than the simple contents of the commandment; it marks the injunction as directed to an aim; and it implies effort. It is not an emotional love, but a willful, intentional love. Also, since the verb “love” is a present tense, love is not something to which we may give expression now and then, as we feel inclined; it is a duty required of us at all times by God. When we have perfect love, we will love one another in spite of all of our faults and imperfections.

Do you have that kind of unconditional love for *all* people? Our love for others should also be sacrificial, giving both time and resources to meet needs.

Conclusion: As we consider our response to the message I must ask you, “Is your relationship to God characterized by boldness or fear? If you have fear in your heart as you face death or the judgment of God, that indicates that something is wrong. And if you do not have love in your heart for all people, especially those who profess the name of Christ, then that is another sign that something is wrong spiritually, and you need to be truly born again. Don’t let another day pass without getting right with God. Turn to Jesus in repentance of sin, and trust in Him as your Savior!

Sources: Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the Old & New Testaments: James – Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975 reprint); H.A. Ironside, *Epistles of John & Jude* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1931); John MacArthur, Jr., *Marks of a True Believer: Study Notes on 1 John 2:18-4:21* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1987); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 16 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. VI (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931); Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia*, Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 43-44; Curtis Vaughan, *A Study Guide Commentary: 1,2,3 John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); Jerry Vines, *Family Fellowship: An Expository Experience in 1 John* (Dallas: Crescendo Publications, 1976); B.F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1883, 1966 edition); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Real: 1 John* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1972); Kenneth S.

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