

1 John 4:12-21 (ESV)

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, 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.

²⁰ If 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.

²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

It's disturbing to find out that some of your folk heroes are not perfect. They are flawed human beings like the rest of us.

Comedian Bill Cosby, thought to be one of the more wholesome entertainers of our day, has been all over the news lately with allegations of past indiscretions which date back several decades.

When a public figure is exposed to scandal, it's big news. It sells magazines and cranks up the ratings.

We live in a celebrity culture. We artificially elevate gifted people to a certain status of prominence. Then when they are shown to be merely mortal, we gawk their demise.

I guess it shouldn't surprise us when people we think highly of end up having a dark side. There's a dark side in all of us. We wish that it weren't there, but it is.

Unlike celebrities, the tabloids aren't interested in exposing our secrets. Yet I wonder if there isn't a primal fear in all of us that one day we'll be found out. Our indiscretions made public for all to see.

This morning we're talking about the perfect love of God in the Gospel. It is the perfection of God will expose the dark side of our sin and depravity. That revelation will either drive us to the cross, or to a life of putting up a façade.

You can either come to Christ in humble repentance, or you can pretend to be something that you're not. A public persona will not hold up under the scrutiny God's perfection.

The dark side of any person, be they a celebrity or just common folk, is the same. It is the selfish, independent, autonomous side of each of us. It prevents us from loving God and others the way we should.

Why can't we love others the way we're supposed to? Part of the reason, according to our text, is fear. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

What is fear, and what are you afraid of? How does fear limit your capacity to love God and others the way you know you should? Why do we need the Gospel in order to even know what true love is?

That is what we'll be talking about today. Love is the overriding theme of this letter that we've been going through for the past couple of months.

One could say that love is the great theme of the entire Bible. The essence of the Biblical message is to love God and our neighbor.

If we did that well, we'd all be better off. But we don't. Our love for God and man is tainted by our fallen nature. Self-interest will often blunt even our most noble desires.

Our greatest joys in life, as well as our greatest disappointments, will all come back to how we deal with that which we love.

When our love goes astray, when it is misplaced, when our love is corrupted by selfish desires, then we open ourselves up to all kinds of things, but ultimately to the judgment of God.

That judgment is what mankind fears more than anything else, whether it's acknowledge or not. Judgment will lead us either to the fear of the LORD, or just plain fear.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge. It is the first step of wisdom. With grace the fear of the LORD leads to a humble and contrite heart.

The fear of the LORD cultivates reverence, humility, and repentance. It brings you to the cross of Christ for grace, forgiveness and restoration.

The fear of the LORD is very different from fear itself. Perfect love casts out all fear.

Fear itself, without the Gospel, does just the opposite. It breeds a defensiveness that hardens the heart. Fear leads one to cover up their flaws instead of exposing them to the light of God's grace.

Some have called pride the callousness of the human heart which seeks to protect oneself. You learn to put up a persona that is nothing more than a cover up of your deepest fears.

Fear is the dread of being found out. It's the root cause of those who are neurotic, anxious and insecure.

Obsessive compulsive behavior is driven by the desire to have control over your environment. The need for control implies the fear of what may happen if things aren't just the way you think they ought to be.

Greed is driven by a fear of being without the necessities of life. There is a lack of trust and confidence with fear. What you dread is surely to come about.

One who is highly possessive is driven by fear. It breeds jealousy, suspicion, and mistrust.

Fear of being hurt will cause one to strike out at another person, either verbally or physically. The thinking is "I'm going to hurt you before you get a chance to hurt me."

Fear causes people to lie, deceive and be untruthful. One learns to avoid the naked truth at all cost. Spinning the truth is nothing more than the fear of disclosure.

Fear is introduced to the world immediately after the fall of man into sin.

Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, and they realized that they could no longer be seen in the same way.

Their eyes were opened, and they hated what they saw in each other and in themselves. Most of all they were afraid of God.

Genesis 3:8-10 (ESV)

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" ¹⁰ And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."

What are you afraid of? What is it that you try to hide from others and hope that God doesn't notice?

I've got all kinds of insecurities that affect the way I live and move and have my being. I suppose most of them come from some kind of fright or phobia.

I can rationally work my way through them, but those fears don't totally leave. They just hide away some place and wait.

Maybe some of you remember your childhood fears. The fear of the dark. The fear of the unknown.

A lot of people say that as children they were scared of what might be lurking underneath their beds at night.

During the day you can look under your bed and see nothing but dust balls. At night, it's a different story. There could be all kinds of creatures under there.

I once put a cassette tape player underneath my younger brother's bed. The first 20 minutes of the tape were silent. The last five or ten minutes I had recorded my best rendition of monster sounds. It had the desired effect. (Looking back, I kind of regret doing that, but my brother is doing fine now.)

Real fear can be a powerful emotion. It can spark the dark side of your imagination. Fear can make you terrified over that which you rationally know isn't plausible.

Romans 8:15 (ESV)

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

Instinctively as a child, you call out to your father when you're scared. There's always going to be some unknowns in your life that will cause you to react. We are not to succumb to our fears, but we are to call out to our Heavenly Father.

2 Timothy 1:7 (ESV)

...for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

What is fear? It's a lack of trust in the sovereign God who will work out all things for your good and His glory.

How does fear limit our capacity to love? That's our second question.

1 John 4:17-18 (ESV)

By this is love perfected with us, 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.

Anyone can be nice and cordial. Not everyone can love others deeply. Anyone can be loving toward those you look upon favorably. Not everyone can love others who have fallen out of your favor.

Fear limits your capacity to love others as God has loved you in the Gospel. Fear causes us to become self-focused. It's a cancer to relationships. It ruins the love that used to be so strong. With fear:

You become more defensive; less vulnerable.

It's hard to be loving when your guard is up.

You are more secretive; less authentic

Honesty and trust aren't optional in a loving relationship.

You are more distant; less intimate.

It's hard to be loving when you are detached from one another.

Fear has to do with punishment. The passage here is dealing with Divine retribution. The wrath of God against sin. There are temporal consequences to sin as well.

You might look bad or lose face. Your pride might be stung or your reputation could take a hit.

I know of people who fear any kind of confrontation with their spouse. They live to avoid anything that might be deemed to be unpleasant.

Fear is causing them to walk on eggshells, which can be emotionally and spiritually exhausting. You can't fully love someone that you're afraid of.

Again, the fear of the LORD is a reverent awe of the One whose love is perfect, holy and wonderfully consistent.

The fear of man is the avoidance of intimacy with another human being who is imperfect and unpredictable.

The God that we worship is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice and goodness and truth.

The fellow sinners we live with are finite, temporal and temperamental. Our moods vary from day to day, and our ability to show grace is inconsistent.

Fear limits our capacity to love because it exposes our own faults and frailties and insecurities.

With God, if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. With our fellow human beings, the response isn't always so clear.

Relationships are kept superficial and shallow when there's fear involved. We learn to hide our real selves, to avoid certain topics, to keep things lite (and phony).

Some here may have a phony relationship with God. You say the right things, but your actions speak louder than your words. You may go through the motions, but your heart isn't into it.

You don't really love God, you're afraid of Him (that's different from the fear of the LORD). Fear has to do with punishment. Whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

You really can't love God if you think knowing and following Him is a nuisance. You would abandon the faith altogether if you thought you could get away with it.

But then there's that matter of Divine wrath. You don't know if it's really out there or not, but you don't want to take a chance.

I don't blame you for fearing the wrath of a God who is holy. Perhaps your resentment has to do with a misguided fear. You're hiding from God rather than coming to Him in faith.

You're afraid of what God might do to you if your sins are fully exposed. How would the LORD respond to your transgressions? Well, you really don't have to wonder about that. It's been done.

What God thinks about sin in general and your sins in particular was fully exposed on the cross. God hates sin, but He loves sinners.

He will turn His back and forsake on those who come to Him with unforgiven sin. He did that to His own Son.

When JESUS took your sins and my sins upon himself, the Father turned His face away from His Son and JESUS cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

That’s what unforgiven leads to. But the LORD did that on the cross so that so He wouldn’t have to do it to you.

If you don’t love God, there’s a reason for it. It’s not because your childhood was messed up or that you’ve been dealt a short hand. It’s because you’re not focused on the Gospel.

That’s where the perfection of love is demonstrated.

If you’re not focused on the Gospel, you think that you’ve got to earn enough merit on your own. You’ve got to measure up. You have to demonstrate to God and the world that you’re good enough to make the grade.

If your love for God is based upon your performance or your circumstances in life, it’s just a matter of time before you throw in the towel. You’re going to fail and your heart is going to turn cold.

What’s the answer?

1 John 4:19 (ESV)

We love because he first loved us.

The Gospel is God centered. It’s what He’s done that’s the good news. If it were left to us to start and maintain a relationship with God, we’d all be lost.

Before the foundation of the world, God choose those who would belong to Him in Christ. Our love for Him is always in response to His love for us.

But that doesn't make us totally passive. We show our love for God, whom we can't see, by loving those around us, who we can see.

1 John 4:20-21 (ESV)

If 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. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

How are you doing with that? I know you're a nice person. You're pleasant to be around, especially those you don't have to live with. How are you doing with those closer to home?

Sometimes it may seem easier to love the God who can't be seen over the people in our lives who are all too visible.

Sometimes all we see in our fellow human beings are their faults and their blemishes.

That's why the Gospel is so essential to loving others as we ought. We may not be able to see God, but He sees us. We can't hide any of our imperfections. He sees them all.

Did that stop JESUS from going to the cross for you? Did He hesitate for one moment when it came to your salvation?

There's nothing generic about the love of God. It is direct, it is personal. It is definite.

If God so loved you, as unworthy of that love as all of us are, so are we to love others.

We're going to do it imperfectly to be sure, but we need not fear. For the perfect love of Christ in the Gospel casts out all fear.