

1 John 4:17

The Perfecting of God's Love

1 John 4:17-19,

1Jn 4:17 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ We love Him because He first loved us.

Once again we come to a passage that has the word “**love**” used 6 times in 3 verses. Obviously, John has not yet left his subject of what genuine biblical love is and how it actually operates and manifests itself in the believer’s life. In looking ahead, it is obvious that he is not yet finished either. It is almost like he is enamored with this idea of love functioning in a believer’s life. In v17, the way that the other translations have actually stated this is very good. They put the “**in this**” at the first rather than at the end of the first phrase, and it certainly seems to help it read better. The ESV reads,

1Jn 4:17 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.

The ISV may even be better.

1Jn 4:17 This is how love has been perfected among us: we will have confidence on the day of judgment because, while we are in this world, we are just like him.

So, what is John really saying? What does he mean when he says “**By this...**”, or “**This is how...**”? What is he referring to when he says “**this**”? Well, it has to be what he has just talked about from v7-16, or that of loving God and therefore having the grace to love one another. He actually uses the phrase “**love one another**” three different times (v7, 11, 12). John’s obvious deduction is that until the believer actually begins to love other people, they really do not have that great of a love for God Himself. V8 said the same thing very strongly,

1Jn 4:8 He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

The way that John expresses it there is a very, very resolute and fixed statement, for he says that the individual actually “**does not know God**” at all. In John’s terminology, he is simply saying that the person who claims to truly know God, but does not love other believers, simply is not saved. It is a very rigid statement that does not leave any wiggle room in it. The Greek language does not allow it to be read any different. The tendency is to “understand” it like this – “Some people who do not love God do not know God...” That is what people want it to say, so that is often the way that they read it. In their mind, they cannot perceive that this is a fixed broad-brush general statement that covers everyone without exception. My question is “Well, why not?” If in reality this is one of John’s major tests to help people discern the difference between genuine salvation and a very false salvation, why would John want to make a lot of exceptions? What good would that do – always providing a spiritual out for people who apparently have no real intention of living how God wants them to live? They are satisfied with religion and just are not into absolutes. Well, for their benefit, God is very much into absolutes, and that is an issue which the average Christian should quickly accept. Scripture just does not make a lot of exceptions

and provide a basis for excuses, personal reasons and justifications for why someone is not willing to be devoted to Christ, or for all of the bogus rationalizations that have no spiritual merit whatsoever. Hopefully, it has been crystal clear that John will have nothing to do with that kind of mindset which is always finding reasons not to be committed to obedience to God's Word. Certainly, all of this is a very revealing test to say the least.

Then, to reinforce what he is saying, [1 John 4:20](#) says,

1Jn 4:20 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?

It becomes even more serious in [1 John 4:21](#) when John makes it an actual commandment.

1Jn 4:21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.

In the NKJV, NIV, ESV, ISV the word “**must**” is added for clarity and emphasis, but it really should not be there because it is not actually in the Greek text. The NASB seems to capture the idea the best.

1Jn 4:21 And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

The verb “**should love**” is in the subjunctive mood which is simply the mood of possibility.

No matter how these verses are approached, there simply is not much wiggle room if someone does not seem to have any meaningful love for their Christian brothers and sisters. In fact, it clearly appears that [1 John 4:17 – 5:3](#) is the most concentrated use of the word “**love**” to be found anywhere in the Bible – 16 uses in 8 verses. The phrase “**has been perfected**” is actually one Greek word – “*teleioo*” and is in the perfect tense, the indicative mood, and the passive voice. The perfect tense represents something that happened in the past, but has a continuing effect and an obvious and existing result. It started in the past and has been continuing since that time. By being in the passive voice John is saying that the work of being “**perfected**” is something that is being done to the believer by God. Stated another way, it is something that the believer cannot complete by their own effort.

So, how is “**love**” actually completed and worked into the believer? Love is accomplished, completed, and perfected when the believer is obedient to the Word of God and to the outworking of the Holy Spirit in their life. That simple statement is what God uses to perfect the believer and to fulfill His purposes in their life – obedience to the Word of God and obedience to the work of the Holy Spirit in them. It should be obvious and apparent that believers who are disobedient and unresponsive to both God's Word and the Holy Spirit will have very little perfected in their life. Stated another way, the process of sanctification or conforming the believer to the image of Christ always involves the believer's response to God's work. The believer is given God's Word and prompting by the Holy Spirit, and it is their responsibility to obediently respond to that work. The more responsive, the greater the maturity, and the less responsive the believer is, the less they will grow and accomplish the fulfillment of God's will for their life. No believer is on spiritual auto-pilot, but they are fully accountable to be responsive to God's work within them. In the overall context of what John is declaring in the entire letter, it should be obvious that the believer's assurance also grows with their obedience.

So, the phrase “**has been perfected**” in v17 simply means to complete or to accomplish.¹ In some verses, it is actually translated as to finish or fulfill. Dr. Vine says that it means “to bring to an end” in the sense of completing or perfecting.² It is translated as “**finish**” in [John 4:34](#),

Jn 4:34 **Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.**

[John 17:4](#) says,

Jn 17:4 **I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.**

Paul said in [Acts 20:24](#),

Ac 20:24 **But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.**

The word “**finish**” carries the meaning of to mature, to complete, and to make perfect by reaching the intended goal.³ This is the goal – to continually be maturing in the Christian life and in the graces of God for that life. As Paul stated it, this is the “**race set before us**”, and it has to be run with “**endurance**”.

Now, what does John mean by the second part of 17 when he says “**that we may have boldness in the day of judgment**”? For every believer, there will be a time of judgment – not for sins committed, but for works that have been done in the name of Christ. Every believer will stand before the “**judgment seat of Christ**” after the rapture and give an account of their life and how responsive they were to both God’s Word and God’s will for their life. In that process, they will either receive rewards or watch what rewards they could have had actually be burned. [1 Corinthians 3:12–15](#) says,

1Co 3:12 **Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with* gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,** ¹³ **each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.** ¹⁴ **If anyone's work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward.** ¹⁵ **If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.**

[2 Corinthians 5:10](#) says,

2Co 5:10 **For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.**

In v17 the word “**boldness**” in the NKJV is generally translated as “**confidence**” in most of the other good translations. It is the Greek word “*parrēsia*” and actually means to have freedom of speech. The love of God has been perfected in this individual and brought to a place that fully reveals the work of the Holy Spirit in their life. The individual lived out their life devoted entirely to Christ.⁴ The word refers to a boldness of speech, a free and fearless confidence, with nothing to hide or of which to be ashamed. It is the idea of not being ashamed before Christ because their life on earth was fully committed to Him. Whenever the believer stands before Christ at His judgment seat, no one will have anything of which they can boast or be proud. It is not that at all. However, the word “*parrēsia*” does imply that the individual who was committed to Christ will not have to be ashamed at that moment in their life. Were they perfect in all things? Certainly not. Did they fail in their life at various times? Sure they did.

However, the overall tenor of their life was one in which they unreservedly gave their life to Christ, were fully committed to Him, and lived their life in a way that was actually pleasing to Christ – and for that they will be rewarded and not stand before God ashamed. Even Paul, one of the godliest men to ever live, said at the end of his life in [1 Timothy 1:15](#) that he was “**the chief of sinners**”.

1Ti 1:15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.

He boldly proclaimed in [2 Timothy 4:6-8](#),

2Ti 4:6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

[James 1:12](#) says,

Jas 1:12 Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

The goal of every believer should be to live their life in such a way that they will not be ashamed when they stand before God and give an account of their life to Him. In my feeble understanding of Scripture, that is a real and dynamic actuality for everyone who is fully devoted to Christ – standing before Him in love and without shame.

Now, John clearly says that there is a spiritual basis and reason for this in v17 when he says “**because as He is, so are we in this world**”. The NIV says “**because in this world we are like Him**”. The word “**like**” is not in the Greek text, but it gives the idea of what John is communicating – as He is, we are. What He would do is what we do. What He would say is what we say. How He would live is how we live. The negative side of this is that if a believer is not really living for Christ and their life is “**lukewarm**” and indifferent to Him, then they will not have a basis for this confidence. In all likelihood they will be ashamed. [1 John 2:28](#) expresses it this way,

1Jn 2:28 And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming.

This is the same Greek word for “**confidence**” that John used in v17. The word for “**ashamed**” is the Greek word *aischynomai* and means that the shame arises from something that an individual has done. Obviously, that would be the meaning simply because people do not become ashamed for the good things that they do. If you help someone who has a great need, there is nothing in that of which to be ashamed. This particular Greek word comes from a root word which carries the idea of disgracing someone or something. If we were to do something that disgraced someone else, it would be difficult to look them in the eyes. That is the idea of what both John is communicating. The unfortunate and underlying result is that the shame prevents a person from doing other things that are right.⁵ It cripples and hinders them from being spiritually productive in their life. In many ways it neutralizes them spiritually. They become so ashamed with what they have done that they simply cannot recover. It is like the young child who when confronted with their disobedience has to look away or hold their head down. That is the sense of the word. However, God does not want the believer to live under shame. [Romans 8:1](#) declares that

there is “**no condemnation**” to those who are in Christ Jesus. [1 John 1:9](#) declares that when we do sin, we come to Christ, confess that sin, and He cleanses us from it. He strengthens the believer in their weakness when they simply come to Him and sincerely confess their sin to Him. It really is a very simple solution. These are great promises that every Christian needs to learn how to appropriate into their life when they do fail. All believers will fail, and miserably at times, but God does not want the believer to remain there and be spiritually handicapped by the failures and shortcomings from which every Christian often times suffers.

The obvious antidote to shame is simply to do what is right. [Philippians 1:20](#) declares,

Php 1:20 according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

Whatever it took in his life, Paul was determined that Christ was going to be glorified. Many believers simply do not have that kind of enduring perspective or mindset on the Christian life. They seem more than satisfied with coming to church on Sunday, but then living as they please and choose the rest of the week. That is very sad – to lose perspective on that which is eternal and enduring. Every believer needs to develop and cultivate a spiritual mindset that they will be fully devoted to Christ. They need to develop an unwavering conviction, and a heartfelt commitment and steadfastness that they are going to live for Christ every day and in every way. This needs to be the cry of their heart and the enduring direction of their life. If they are both willing and able to do that, then when they see Christ they will not be ashamed, but will enter into His presence with great joy and anticipation of what He has prepared for them simply because they were willing to magnify him in their life. As John declares, they will have “**boldness in the day of judgment**”. This is what gives meaning and substance to our lives.

ENDNOTES

¹ Strong, 1409.

² Vine, 846.

³ Zodhiates, 1373.

⁴ Wuest, 169.

⁵ Vine, 69.

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