

1 John 4:17-19

The Perfecting of God's Love, Part 2

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.

In reading through the whole of this section on the love of God, there is something that seems to clearly stand out. It is the fact that when John talks about the believer loving God that he also talks about the believer loving other believers. It is the idea that the two cannot somehow be separated and divorced from one another. It is as if they are inseparably linked to one another – which they actually are. It would be a spiritual dichotomy for a professing believer to dogmatically assert their love for God, but then be devoid of a love for other Christians, as well as those who are without Christ. John simply does not provide that luxury, but to the contrary he links the reality of a person's love for God with their ability to love other believers. It appears from [1 John 4:8](#) that **not** to love other believers is an indication that the individual does **not** actually love God.

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

In other words, John says that loving other believers is the biblical evidence that a person is truly born again. [1 John 4:12](#) says something similar,

1Jn 4:12 No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.

What is interesting in this section of Scripture is the simple fact that John does not deal with Christians that are easy to love or with Christians that are not easy to love. John never makes any distinctions which is his way of indicating that Christians are to love other believers in spite of how they may actually be treated by them. The word that John uses to capture this idea is the word “**abides**” in [1 John 4:16](#).

1Jn 4:16 And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

The phrase that is important to understand is the phrase “**abides in love**”. The word “**abides**” is a very common New Testament word that means to continue, to dwell, or to remain. In its simple definition it simply means to stay in a particular place, state, or relation.¹ The idea in v16 is that the true believer is someone who has personally experienced the love of God in their own life and the result of that experience is that it causes them to live in such a way that they display that same kind of love to other people. They know that the love that God has given to them through salvation was completely undeserved, so they are more than willing to demonstrate that same kind of love to other people even though outwardly they may not seem to merit that love. Obviously, no one who has been saved deserved the salvation that God has given to them, so when they demonstrate that kind of love to the undeserving it is simply a testimony of God's love working through them for other people.

What John is expressing is simply the fact that the believer is someone whose life is being lived under the control and the influence of God's love. The love of God is constraining the believer. The love of God is compelling the believer to live with a heart that is full of love for other people. The Holy Spirit desires that the love of God becomes the overriding factor in all of the relationships of the believer's life, whether good or bad. In other words, the believer cannot allow their attitude and response to difficult people to be governed and controlled by the actions of those people. It should simply be expected that people who are unkind will not say kind things are due kind things towards other people. It should simply be expected and understood that people who are unloving will not do loving things towards other individuals. Certainly, Christ has to be the supreme example of someone who loved other people in spite of how unloving they were towards Him. Whenever a believer looks at their own life, certainly they cannot say that the reason that God saved them was because of some personal merit or righteousness in their life. To the contrary, God saves people who actually hate Him and who despise His word and His Son. God finds no merit in the unbeliever's life that warrants Him giving them salvation. In fact, there is no explanation as to why God would save anyone because no one is deserving of His love. So from a very practical perspective, what all of this means is that the believer's attitude towards other believers, as well as those who are lost and without Christ, must not be determined and/or controlled by what those people are like or what they may have done.² They are no different than we were before we were saved.

Too often we see other people as threats, or as an inconvenience, or as a nuisance in our life. They may take up our time, they may have wronged us in some way, or they may simply be unenjoyable to be around. We all have people like this in our life and ultimately they are placed there by God in order to test the reality of our personal salvation. I am grateful that when God looked at my horrible existence prior to salvation that rather than seeing me as an annoyance and an aggravation that He saw me as a person who was under the domain and control of Satan and as someone living in spiritual darkness and depravity. In that condition, God by His sheer grace and mercy reached out in compassion to someone who deserved no compassion. That has to be both the attitude and the approach that every believer has towards everyone else. If a believer makes life to be all about them, all about their personal goals, and all about their special agendas, then most likely they will never understand the love of God and I doubt that they will even have the motivation to consider demonstrating the love of God to other people. [Philippians 2:5-8](#) is the ultimate passage on what it means to give one's life away so that God the Father can be glorified.

Php 2:5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of death*, even the death of the cross.

This is the “**mind**” that has to be in the person who is truly saved. This is the way that God has called on every believer to respond to life. Christ made himself of no reputation and took on the form of a servant. He gave up what was rightfully His so that those of us who deserved nothing could be saved. In the terminology that [1 John](#) is using, the love of God was dwelling in Christ and operating in Christ. Christ divested Himself of what was rightfully His and of what He rightfully deserved so that those of us who did not deserve salvation could have it abundantly. This has to be the “**mind**” that is developed

in the true believer, and it is how the Christian life should be perceived. The goal is to always be as much like Christ as possible. John is not willing to abandon his teaching on love for other believers, as well as nonbelievers, as being the genuine evidence of biblical salvation in a person's life. This is how a Christian is to live and it is not something that can simply be intermittent, casual, and just occasional. Love is John's message. It is a clear message. As an example, simply suppose that someone is very unkind to you personally. Maybe they falsely accused you of something, or maybe they have treated you in somewhat of a demeaning way. In that case, what does John say should be a true believer's response? Well it is very simple. John says that we should be both kind and loving to that individual who has treated us unkindly. The tendency that most Christians have is to avoid that individual, or to shun any kind of Christlike response. I say this with grace, but either one of those responses would be unbiblical and certainly not Christlike, and unless we understand these verses in [1 John 4](#) that way I doubt seriously that any of us would be Christlike in our response.

What John is providing is doctrine, and doctrine has to be understood as something that God has given to the believer to be lived out in their life. Doctrine is for living, and everything that confronts us as believers must be understood and applied in light of biblical doctrine. Maybe the question that has to be asked is a very simple one. What if God had treated me personally in the way that I treated someone else who was unkind and ungracious to me? What if that had been God's attitude towards me? The issue that many Christians seem to have is that they are completely satisfied with God's response of love and forgiveness to their sin, but they are dogmatically reluctant to respond in the same way to someone else's negative action towards them. They love God's forgiveness of their sins, but they are most unwilling to be forgiving to someone else. What does that say about the individual's understanding of either God or Scripture? Whenever difficulty confronts the believer, the proper biblical response is to demonstrate the love of God to the undeserving. Martyn Lloyd Jones explains it this way. He says,

“So, my whole life must be disciplined. I must watch myself and observe myself in every detail of my life, and I must mortify everything that is opposed to this love.”³

Those are very strong words, but they are very accurate. The goal is never just simple forgiveness for us, but the goal entails living for Christ in such a way that other people are drawn to the love of God through our life. That does take personal discipline and resolve. It does take a kind of spiritual determination that refuses to be overcome by personal self-interest and self-regard. Too often the tendency is to always live for ourselves and to do what is convenient and preferential for us personally. Well that may satisfy someone for the moment, but from an eternal perspective it ultimately has no value and no associated reward. In some ways it reveals that the love of God simply does not exist in an individual - no matter what they may confess. What John is delineating in this passage is the simple fact that believers demonstrate love for other individuals simply because God lives and dwells in them. In reality, that is his point - believers are of God and therefore should live in a way that is pleasing to Him. Stated another way, a believer cannot genuinely testify of their relationship to God if they have no love for other believers. What that scenario reveals is that that individual only has a kind of intellectual salvation that has never really impacted their life, and John is very clear to indicate that such a depiction reveals that the individual may never really have even been saved.

The point that John is making cannot be overlooked. What he is saying in these verses is that God is the One who has supernaturally placed His life in our life. It has been the work of His Holy Spirit and His

supernatural outworking in the believer's life that creates both the ability and the willingness to love as God loves. This is not something that just comes naturally to the believer, but rather it is an attribute that has to be supernaturally imparted to them - and it is! That is the point. This characteristic of loving God and loving other believers go hand-in-hand with one another. In other words, John in this test is not going to allow someone to say that they love God, but they do not have to love other believers. To the contrary, he says that God's work in a true believer's life is such that it is manifested in a genuine love and compassion for other believers no matter how difficult and how abrasive they may actually be at various times. If someone is a genuine believer, then it is only normal that they have a deep awareness of the power and presence of God which is actively at work in their life. God cannot be indwelling an individual and working deeply in their life and they not know that. Salvation is much, much broader than simply having our sins forgiven, but it is having the life of God actually guiding, motivating, and controlling the heart and mind of the believer. The term that John uses in [1 John 4:12 and 17](#) is that the love of God has actually **"been perfected in us"**. This is not some kind of passive, arbitrary work, but it is a real and dynamic outworking of salvation in the believer's life. Salvation would be meaningless if this were not true.

Now, one of the primary truths that we want to take from this passage is in [1 John 4:18](#) that simply says,

1 Jn 4:18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear,

Obviously, when John speaks of this **"fear"** he is specifically referring back to the **"day of judgment"** in v17. It will be a real moment in time when a lost individual is brought before the living God and God makes a judicial declaration that their name is not written in the Lamb's Book of Life. For the lost man, no matter who he is and no matter what level of prestige that he may have had on the earth, this moment will come. It is a moment in time that every individual who is without Christ should fear. In just a moment the individual is physically alive, and then they are physically dead. [Hebrews 9:27](#) declares,

Heb 9:27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,

Everything about God that man has rejected will at that very moment become the greatest and most terrifying reality imaginable for them. Nothing that they ever imagined will compare to what will take place as they stand before the God of all eternity and hear His pronouncement of eternal judgment on their life. It will be a terrifying moment to say the least.

However, for the believer, they will never face that moment and that is exactly why John can declare that **"perfect love casts out fear"**. This is what salvation does for the believer - it removes the fear of God's judgment over their life. Believers are not only being perfected in God's love, but they have also been delivered from God's wrath. [Hebrews 2:14-15](#) says this about Christ,

Heb 2:14 Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

It is not that we as believers will stand before God based on some kind of personal merit that we have earned, but we will stand before God based on the righteousness of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness that is provided to us through His blood. We will not be standing there guiltless and uncondemned based on

personal righteousness or good works, but based solely on the work of Jesus Christ. If we had to stand before God in any other fashion and on any other basis, we would be utterly without hope or help.

So how can you know and how can you have assurance that you will not be afraid of that moment when you stand before God and give an account of your life? Well, it is because the love that God is perfecting and has perfected in your life removes that “**fear**” and apprehension. As you grow in your love for God and in your love for Christ and other believers, that fear is removed. There is no punishment to be meted out, but simply a demonstration by God of His great love and affection for you in spite of all of those things in your life where you failed Him miserably. As John simply says – “**There is no fear in love...**” I love the way that Paul wrote about this in [Romans 8:15](#) when he said,

Ro 8:15 For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!"

ENDNOTES

¹ Strong, 1229.

² Lloyd-Jones, 521.

³ Lloyd-Jones, 526.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Strong, James. *The New Strong's Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001.