

An Expository Sermon. (1 John 4: 17, 18.)

by Daniel Steele

The sermon explores the transformative power of perfect love in the Christian faith, emphasizing its ability to cast out fear and enable believers to confidently face judgment.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4, Deuteronomy 30:6, Matthew 5:48, John 14:15, Romans 6:6, Colossians 2:11, 1 John 4:7-19

Topics: "Perfect Love", "Fear And Faith"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the importance of perfect love in the Christian faith, emphasizing that love and fear are the essence of religion, with Christianity being the only religion based on love. He delves into the text from 1 John 4:17-18, discussing the significance of love made perfect in casting out fear, leading to boldness in the day of judgment. Steele explains the exegesis of the text, highlighting the distinction between God's love toward us and our love toward God, ultimately pointing to the possibility of living in a state of perfect love devoid of fear.

Transcript

"Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." -- 1 John 4: 17, 18.

The foundation of the Christian doctrines is laid in the word of God. We, Protestants, believe that no doctrine is to be received or enforced upon any person that is not found here in the open Bible. Nevertheless, the confirmations of a doctrine are found in our own experience. I believe all the doctrines of the Bible are confirmed in Christian experience, even the doctrine of the Trinity. You know that prayer reaches its highest development only in connection with that doctrine. If you do not, I do; and no one can have a real earnest grip on God who has no mediator between God and himself, no divine Christ, no personal Comforter. So that all the doctrines of the word of God find a response in human needs and in human experience. They are confirmed. The object of this Biblical exposition is twofold. First, to develop the doctrinal basis of the higher forms of Christian experience; and secondly, to encourage confirmatory testimony. And it is wise to keep these two running right along, side by side, grounding the doctrine in the clear exposition of the word of God, and then calling forth the witnesses to confirm its truth.

The text has two words in it -- fear and love; and these, by the way, make up all there is of religion. All pagan religions of the world are made up of fear, dread of their gods. The only religion in the world the substance of which is love came down from heaven in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christianity is

the only religion that ever existed upon the face of the earth, or ever will exist, the essence of which is love. We shall have something to say farther on with respect to the matter of fear and love in Christian experience.

A little exegesis now of the text, a little explanation of what it means. In the first place, the first verse we read has a dispute about it. "Herein is our love made perfect." If you look in the margin of your Bibles you will find it reads there, "Love with us." "Herein is love with us made perfect." There is a class of writers and teachers who insist that the love spoken of in that sentence is not our love toward God, but God's love toward us. The absurdity of that interpretation is found in the very declaration that God's love is ever made perfect. It always is perfect, and was from the beginning. The second difficulty is, that it is out of harmony with the context, for the word "love" before this text occurs in the following connection: "And he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God." That is to say, he who loves God, and abides in that love, dwells in God. And the very next passage after this indicates that the love is the love which proceeds from the human heart. "There is no fear in love"; not referring to God's love to us, but our love toward God. We contend, therefore, that the word "love" right along in these three verses refers to the human love, the love of a human soul going out toward God. The class of writers that we speak of, who prefer the other way, considering that this refers to God's love, do so because it stands in the way of their theory that no person can have perfect love who dwells here on the earth. I think John did not belong to that class of people. "Herein is our love made perfect": the love which we have toward God, that we may have confidence or boldness in view of the day of judgment, not simply in the day of judgment. For John is speaking now of what the Christian feels in contemplation of the day of judgment; and this is the confidence which we have in view of the day of judgment, and this confidence is a token, an assurance, a declaration, that love has reached perfection in the heart. That is to say it has excluded all antagonisms to itself. All dread, all fear, tormenting and servile fear, have been excluded; and the thought of the apostle is that this is the test of perfect love, love which has become pure and unmingled, excluding everything which is antagonistic to it, so that the person can contemplate the descending Judge without a fear.

How is it with you this hour, supposing this roof were removed, and you should see with these natural eyes of yours the great white throne descending, and the Judge of the quick and the dead seated thereon? What emotion arises in your heart in view of that, if you should think of it for a moment as a real fact? Is there a shrinking away, is there fear, is there dread? I think I would meet him half-way. I think it is Bishop Simpson who uses this illustration. If you go into a machine-shop where the floor is covered with dirt and iron filings, you take a strong magnet and pass it near the floor, and every particle of iron will leave the dirt, and spring up and cleave to the magnet. And he says that when the Lord Jesus Christ shall come into the sphere of this world in his glorified person, the moment he descends into our atmosphere the magnetism of his glorified person will draw the body of every believer out of the dust to meet him in the air. There is no fear in perfect or pure love. This is the thought of John here. John was a very peculiar writer. He was not a reasoner like the Apostle Paul. Paul delighted to run off in long chains of logic. John was an intuitive man; he stood face to face with truth, and he declared it. He was very much like his Lord and Master. He had been so intimate with him that his spiritual intuitions were awake and clear. What was self-evident to him, in other people had to be reached by a long, laborious process of logic. John therefore announces, and when he attempts to reason he sometimes drops off one premise, and comes to his conclusion without it; and so we have to study to find out the missing link. There is a missing link here in our text, and it is this: The Judge will not condemn facsimiles of himself. And this is his syllogism, if we may construct it. The Judge will not condemn facsimiles of himself. We are facsimiles of the Lord Jesus. Therefore he will not condemn us, and we have no fear in view of the day of judgment. We are facsimiles

of him. Why should we be afraid of judgment? He will not condemn those who are just like himself. That is the logic of John if you put in the missing link here.

"The sense of our text must be gained," says Dean Alford, the great English scholar, "by strictly keeping to the tenses of the text," especially the passage which I have just read: "Because as he is, so are we in this world." Some people alter the text and make it read thus: "Because as he was, so are we in this world." It is a great truth that we are as Jesus was in this world. He was abused, misunderstood, he was persecuted, vilified, maligned, and at last they hung him up between two thieves; and he says himself, "As they have persecuted me, they will persecute you." It is a great truth that we are in this world very much as Jesus Christ was when he was here, misunderstood and persecuted as he was.

But that is not the utterance of John here. John uses the present tense and not the past. Suppose we alter another verb here in the text, we shall have a great truth, but not a truth that John announces. Because as he is, we shall be hereafter. As he is glorified we shall be hereafter; we shall stand a row of glorified brothers with Jesus at the head. Splendid truth! But John does not announce it in this text. And Dean Alford insists that we shall cling to the exact tenses in order to get the meaning. And the tense is this: Because as he is, today, in heaven, so we are in this world. In what respect is the likeness? I will give you Dean Alford's note on this subject. He was not considered a "perfectionist." He was regarded as very well-balanced, a very proper and conservative Church of England man. So I give you his note upon it that you may see that I am not straining the passage at all. This is his note. He asks the question: Wherein is the likeness? As Jesus is today enthroned on the throne of the Father, so are we in this world. He says the likeness is not in the fact of trials and persecutions through which we are passing. It is not in the fact that we are the adopted sons of God, or beloved of God, as he, the only begotten Son is loved of God. In the third place, it is not by our being not of the world, as Christ is not of the world. In the fourth place, it is not in the fact that we live in love as he lives in love; but in the fact that we are righteous as he is righteous. This is the note of Dean Alford upon that subject --that we are righteous in this world as he is righteous. And he confirms that position by quoting several passages in this very epistle to show that that is a favorite thought with John. He refers to the 2nd chapter, and 29th verse, "If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him." And in the 3rd chapter and 3rd verse you will find: "And every one that hath this hope set on him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. Dean Alford goes on to say that John refers to the fundamental truth on which our love rests, and says, 'Because we are absolutely like Christ, because we are in Christ himself, because he lives in us -- without this there can be no likeness to him.' Hence, the likeness to Christ consists in the fact that we have the moral image of Christ, the righteousness of Christ, the holiness of Christ. Not an imputed holiness, but an imparted, an inwrought holiness, making us facsimiles of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We now come to the topic which we said we would speak of -- the fear and love that the Christian experiences. I have said that all pagan religions are made up of fear. There are four possibilities of the combination of fear and love.

In the first place, there is one class of people who have neither fear nor love. I do not refer to pagans, but to a class of people worse than pagans -- gospel hardened sinners. They do not love God, and they have no fear. I am sorry to say that there is a large class of these in the country. The second class is made up of those who fear without love, and the very first step toward reaching the first class is to bring them into the second; bring them under conviction for sin and make them fear; uncap the smoking pit of perdition and let them look into it and see the dreadful end of the wicked. I believe in preaching the terrors of the law. I believe one great error of modern times is to omit the preaching of the law. John Wesley said there was a

class of men that held gospel services, but for his part he held law and gospel services. And in order to bring men who have neither fear nor love into a better state, you must preach to them the law of God. As Bishop Taylor said: You must broadsword them with the law. Cut them to the heart; make them cry out for fear of the penalty of violated law. When sinners are thus convicted they have fear of God without love, and we are to treat them so as to point them away from Sinai, after they have had a glimpse of its fiery lightnings, to Calvary, and to the Lord Jesus Christ. The third class is made up of those who have both love and fear. I think, if a census was taken of the whole Christian church by a competent person (and that competent person would have to have omniscience to read all hearts), he would find a very large number, I am afraid a majority of the Christian church, whose Christianity is not spurious, but is in the mixed condition of fear, or dread and love: and that is their condition before God. The impulse to service is largely fear, not a mighty, resistless love moving them on as upon the wings of angels. The fourth class is the class spoken of by John in our text, love without fear, which he calls perfect love. I do not think that John, when he spoke of that class, was thinking of angels or imaginary beings. He was speaking out of the depths of his own experience. He knew the possibility of having love without fear filling all the soul. Love the impulse to service; love moving glad souls further in every line of activity to which they are appointed by the Holy Spirit, or by the indications of divine Providence. I thank God for the possibility of living in this world in this blessed condition, divested of all fear that hath torment, all dread of God, all dread of the penalty or punishment of the law.

I call your attention to the exact language of John here. He says, perfect love casts out fear; not represses it, not holds it down, but casts it out, separates it from the soul. What is dread? What is fear? Why, it is the first-born of sin. Study the second chapter of Genesis, when our first parents committed sin.

What was the first-born emotion in their hearts when they heard the voice of God in the garden? Dread, fear, a disposition to hide themselves. When, therefore, the first-born is cast out, you see that the mother, sin, is cast out also. If fear is cast out, we say the mother that breeds the fear is also cast out. For if sin remains in the heart, there must be more or less dread or fear.

Now, notice that John does not say of these persons who are not made perfect in love that they are not Christians. John is too sagacious for that. He does not throw stones at them. He does not say you are a guilty sinner because your love is a mixed love. What he does say is this -- that it is not made perfect, it is not complete, it is not pure; there are elements in it which give it a mingled character. The plain implication is that there are degrees in Christian love and that it is possible for us to live and to love year after year with an imperfect love; and it is possible also for men dwelling on the earth, living in the body surrounded by the various temptations of this probationary state, to be perfect in love, to have pure love.

But what is perfect love? If you should go back to the Old Testament you would find what perfect love is; for the Old Testament and the New are at the bottom all the same, and the same doctrines are taught. I turn to Deut. 6:4, 5, for the answer to the question: "What is perfect love?" It begins with the celebrated, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord." Every Jew babe born into the world is taught to say that verse. Then follows this: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." That is the doctrine of the Old Testament, which is a definition of the perfect love which John speaks of in the New Testament near its close, showing the unity of the two dispensations showing that true religion has always been in the world.

But somebody here starts up and says, "That is an impossible command. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, mind, and strength." And he has a text to sustain him in the declaration. The text is

this: "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." Does God give impossible commands? John in this very epistle says his commandments are not grievous, not oppressive, not beyond our power to obey. Every command implies a promise of aid, of help to fulfill the command. And the command which I have quoted is the biggest command in the Bible, the all-including command of love toward God and love toward our fellow men, for that follows necessarily from it. There accompanies, therefore, every command, a promise of grace to aid in keeping that command, an implied promise. What is the implied promise here? Turn to the same Old Testament. Deut. 30:6 shows how men will be assisted to obey this commandment. "And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live." Here it is, then in a nutshell. God does not give people impossible commands. When he commands you to love him with all your heart, he sends down the divine and blessed Holy Spirit to perform a surgical operation upon your heart, so that you may love him: to cut away the carnality from your being, to remove the depravity from your heart, and to give you ability to fulfill this great command. Circumcision is the type of the entire sanctification of the heart. The doctrine of spiritual circumcision comes into the New Testament in a rather remarkable form. I want to quote from Col. 2:11, "In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ." Not the body of the sins of the flesh, but the body or totality of the flesh, the sphere of sin, as in Rom. 6:6, where "the body of sin is destroyed." See the revision. The circumcision of Christ, that is, the circumcision which Christ affords through his mediation and through the gift of the Holy Spirit, is entire sanctification.

The doctrine of our text, then, is simply this: that the gateway into perfect love is spiritual circumcision or entire sanctification. Entire sanctification, like circumcision, is an instantaneous act, the gateway into a state, a continued state, in this world and forever hereafter, of loving God with all the heart and mind and strength. This love is perfect, we say, because it is pure. Not perfect in degree. I think I love God more today than I did yesterday. I love him more today because I have a larger capacity for love, an increasing apprehension. One element of our happiness here and in the world to come is in our growth and expansion and development, so that we shall know more of God, and the more we know of him the more we shall love him.

One of the popular objections against the doctrine of Christian perfection is that we teach the doctrine that God lays a bound before the Christian beyond which he cannot go. We do not teach any such doctrine. We teach the doctrine of arriving at a state of pure love, love that casts out all fear, love that takes hold of our enemies and loves them, the very love spoken of in the Sermon on the Mount, the very love spoken of by Christ when he said, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." The term perfection is misunderstood. It is a term which I used to skip when I was preaching in my earlier ministry, because of the opprobrium that has attended it. But one day I read this passage: "He that is ashamed of me or my words, of him will I be ashamed before my Father and his holy angels." I said then, I will find out what it means, and I will stand by it. This is one of his words. I have given you my explanation of it. I do not think it is an ideal perfection. It is an attainable one; one that may be wrought in the soul by the power of the Holy Ghost; a perfection we may receive here and now by a surrender of ourselves unto God, and claiming Jesus Christ as our wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and eternal redemption, receiving the Divine Spirit for his full work upon our souls, for that work of spiritual circumcision of which we have been speaking.

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