

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of perfected love in giving us confidence in the day of judgment and fearlessness in the face of judgment.

Duration: 35:15

Scripture: John 4:34, John 19:28, James 2:22, 1 John 3:14, 1 John 4:17

Topics: "Perfect Love"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of approaching the day of judgment with fearlessness and confidence. He uses the example of a man named Wallace Blom who received a cancer diagnosis to illustrate this point. The preacher explains that when we yield to the power of the Holy Spirit and engage in acts of kindness and love, we feel confident before God. On the other hand, when we are self-centered and focused on worldly comforts, we become weak and insecure. The main message of the sermon is that we should strive to have confidence and boldness for the day of judgment, and to eliminate fear through acts of love and selflessness.

Transcript

1st John, chapter 4, verses 17 through 21. In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love.

We love because he first loved us. 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.

And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God, should love his brother also. So, upon further reflection of the text that I announced, I decided to connect verses 20 and 21 with next week's text. So this morning we are going to focus on verses 17 and 18 and 19.

Verse 17 tells us how to have something that everybody wants to have. And verse 18 tells us how to get rid of something that everybody wants to get rid of. So the text is immediately relevant.

You don't have to work to make it relevant at all. Verse 17 tells us how to have confidence or boldness for the day of judgment. And verse 18 tells us how to get rid of fear for the day of judgment.

They are simply two sides of the same coin, aren't they? Being confident before God is just the other side of the coin from not being afraid before God. So the main point of the text is crystal clear from the outset. Namely, John wants this morning for you to have confidence as you contemplate meeting him on the judgment day.

He doesn't want you to have any fear about that. He doesn't want you to be scared as you think about your own death and meeting him. Let's think for a minute about the day of judgment here in verse 17.

I sometimes wonder if people believe that is going to happen anymore. The Lord Jesus really spoke a lot about this issue. The word hell occurs in the New Testament twelve times.

Eleven of them on the lips of Jesus. The other one in the book of Jude. Paul never mentions it.

Jesus, besides speaking of hell, spoke of judgment and, in the very language of John, the day of judgment. For example, he said, And if anyone will not receive you, my disciples, or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

So he warned us so clearly. It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that comes the judgment. And then he spelled it out with words that are far more graphic than most preachers today would even dare to use.

If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. One of the reasons I wonder whether we today believe in this is because of the amazing public zeal that is expressed almost throughout the church against the possibility of a nuclear holocaust.

Not that you shouldn't express such public zeal. My question is, where is a correspondingly earnest public zeal for the divine holocaust that is coming? The reason it puzzles me is because the nuclear holocaust is only a possibility, whereas the divine holocaust of wrath is a biblical certainty. The nuclear holocaust will only snuff out life that is temporary and earthly.

The divine holocaust is going to snuff out eternal life and bring misery upon unbelievers that far outstrips any disease that can be caused by nuclear radiation. So it puzzles me that Christians who don't seem to get worked up about the divine holocaust get so worked up about the, by comparison, little nuclear holocaust. And I can only wonder, maybe they don't believe in hell anymore.

Maybe people don't believe in the day of judgment like John does. Well, I hope that at Bethlehem we believe the word of God. I pray that I believe it and that you believe it and our actions come into conformity with it and that we take it seriously like John does.

I hope that when your heart recoils at the tragedy of a nuclear holocaust, you will let that recoiling overflow the temporal bounds of a nuclear holocaust and recoil at the reality of a divine holocaust of wrath that comes upon all humanity in all ages. And I hope that when you feel an impulse to want to protect the world and your family and your country from the bomb, that you will enlarge that impulse of love. Let it be enlarged so that you care, really care, about saving the world from the divine holocaust of wrath that's coming upon your family and the world and this country.

According to 1 John chapter 4, verses 17 to 18, there is a way to approach the day of judgment with fearlessness and confidence. Nobody who is willing to follow John's teaching here has to approach his death scared or uncertain of the outcome of the judgment. What would you say if you had been in Steve's shoes yesterday when he was at the hospital with Wallace Blum, 81 years old, a widower, lives alone.

They did surgery, went up in his chest cavity. The doctor comes in, tells Steve while he's there, it's malignant. Took out a big hunk.

Said, we won't do radiation therapy probably at your age. What would you say to Wallace Blum? The thrilling thing about being a pastor and believing the Bible is we've got terrific news for Wallace Blum. That there doesn't have to be one whisper of fear or lack of confidence as he faces the prospect of his own death, whether it's ten years from now, by God's grace, or ten weeks from now.

And when any of you go to visit Wallace, you can be encouraging that there is a way to know that you will pass muster at the judgment day. You don't have to be like the Jehovah's Witnesses and sort of cross your finger and hope that you might be among the number who really make it through. This book is written to give us assurance that at the judgment day we can have confidence.

Well, how does it do it? Let's look at these two verses. First of all, in verse 17, there are three clauses. First, in this is love perfected with us.

Second, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment. Third, because as He is, so are we in this world. It says that the result of having love perfected in us is confidence at the day of judgment.

And then it says that the reason that perfected love gives confidence at the day of judgment is because it shows that we are like Christ in the world. Now let's take those one at a time and see if we can understand them. First, the first clause of verse 17.

What is it to have perfected love? In this is love perfected with us. So we need to ask what is this? And if you have the first version of the New International Version, you don't have that phrase. In this.

They left it out. But all you need to do is look around in the Bibles around you and it's in the RSV and the King James Version and the New American Standard and in the new version of the NIV. But they dropped it so you just have to trust me that it's there.

In this is love perfected. What is this? Well, in the preceding verse it says God is love and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him. In this is love perfected with us.

So I would take this to refer to the abiding in love or abiding in God and God's abiding in us. So if you abide in love, love is perfected with you. There's an even more important connection if you look up at verse 12 of chapter 4. The same two ideas of God's abiding in us and our being perfected or love being perfected in us are both there in verse 12.

It says no man has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. In other words, perfected love refers to God's love coming to completion or coming to expression as we love each other.

You see that? No man has ever seen God. If we love each other, his love is perfected in us. So perfected love in verse 12 is the love of God expressing itself in our love for other people.

Now, this is really important that you get a hold of this because I'm going to put a meaning upon the word perfected that it doesn't usually carry in English. And I'll have to try to justify it from the context. Most people, when they think of the English word perfected or perfect, they say, well, first there was something that was flawed.

And you work on it and you take the flaws out of it and you perfect it and what you've got left is something that is flawless. That's what perfect means in English. That's not what it means in Greek, usually.

The word teleiao, from which we get all of our tele words, telephone and telegraph and things that have a goal. What it usually means is when something is completed or accomplished or fulfilled or reaches a goal. It does not imply whether the process getting there is flawless or not.

I'll show you some examples. You don't need to look these up because they're all over the place. John chapter 4, verse 34.

Jesus says, my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. Now, that's the same Greek word that's translated perfect in chapter 4, verse 17 of our book. What does it mean? That he takes an imperfect word of God, works on God's work and makes it flawless now? Not at all.

He takes an assignment from God. Do this, my son, and he puts it into action and so perfects it or completes it or accomplishes it. Another one would be John 19, 28, where Jesus says, I thirst, and John comments, he said this, in order to fulfill the scriptures.

The word fulfill is the same word for perfect in 1 John 4, 17. What does it mean? That the scriptures are imperfect? You take an imperfect, flawed scripture, you work on it a little bit and then you present it flawless to the world? No, it means that in the scriptures there are promises. Promises are given.

They are not complete yet. So Jesus completes them or fulfills them or accomplishes them and then they are perfected. That is, they come to their goal.

Here's a really important analogy. James chapter 2, verse 22. He says, you see that faith was active along with Abraham's works and faith was completed by his works.

Same word. Now, what does that mean? That all of a sudden, when Abraham offered Isaac, he became perfect in his faith? His faith was flawless from that day on? Not at all. All it means is faith was internal, subjective, and then it became real, active, completed.

It reached its goal. When the knife went into the air and started down, it was perfected in the sense of the biblical meaning of completed or accomplished. Another example is a journey or a course or a path of life.

Paul says in Acts 20, 24, If only I might accomplish, same word, perfect, my course and the ministry which I have received from the Lord. Paul doesn't mean that he expects that his ministry or his course of life will be flawless or sinlessly perfect. He means, I fully expect God will give me the grace to finish the assignments He's given me to do.

I'll get to Rome if He tells me I'm going to get to Rome. I'll preach if He tells me to preach. I'll die if He tells me to die.

I am going to complete, accomplish, fulfill, and in that sense, perfect my ministry. Now, come back to verse 12 of 1 John 4 and we'll read it in that light. If we love one another, God abides in us and His love is

perfected in us.

Following the normal usage of the word, this would not mean that our love is flawless or sinlessly perfect. It would mean that it is God's love coming into action. God's love reaching its goal in real deeds of kindness and mercy.

Love is not incomplete or unfulfilled. It reaches its goal in action. So now back to verse 17 of our text.

The first clause of this verse would be, paraphrase something like this, In this, that is, in your love for each other, God's love is put into action and so reaches its appointed goal. That's all that perfected means. It does not mean flawlessly implemented.

It means perfected love is don't just talk about sharing Christ, share Christ. Perfected love is don't just talk about the hungry, feed the hungry. Perfected love is don't just talk about how new believers flounder, disciple a new believer.

It's love that's not half a Christian, it's whole Christian. The half that's inside and the half that gets outside in action. It perfects itself in implementation.

Second clause of verse 17. In this is love perfected with us that we may have confidence for the day of judgment. Now in view of what we've seen so far, what's the source of confidence in the day of judgment? Answer, by putting God's love into real action among us, you gain confidence for the day of judgment.

It doesn't mean that we gain confidence through being sinlessly perfect. That would contradict chapter 1 verses 7 to 10 where it says, if we say we have no sin, we're a liar. And that's not what the word usually means in the New Testament.

We don't gain confidence by being sinlessly perfect. We gain confidence by putting our money where our mouth is. Turn to chapter 3 verse 18 of 1 John.

The flow of thought between verses 18 and 19 of 1 John 3 is the same as in our text. It says, little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth. Now just stop there.

That's the same as saying, little children, let God's love be perfected in you. It would be imperfect, incomplete, unaccomplished, unfulfilled if you just talked about it. Or felt about it.

Or thought about it. And until it comes into deed and truth, it isn't perfected. So he says, let love be perfected.

Love in deed and not just in words. And what will the result be in verse 19? The same as the result in our text. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us.

So you want to have assurance before the throne of God? Love each other in real deeds of kindness. So our text is really not saying anything new. I mean, John just says the same thing week after week after week.

He says, example chapter 3 verse 14, we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren. So today's text simply stresses this new thing. The love that gives you confidence for the day of judgment is love that is not imperfect and just inside it's perfected.

It is real, active, nitty gritty, rubber on the pavement love. When you put your money where your mouth is, then you will overcome the pangs of conscience that take away your confidence and give you fear. Last clause of verse 17.

In this is love perfected with us that we may have confidence for the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world. Now the assumption in that last clause is God won't condemn people who are like his son. As he is, so are we in the world.

So if you are like Jesus, then you can see that you won't have to be afraid at the judgment day. Anybody that stands beside Jesus, whose life is like Jesus, doesn't need to be afraid. God will never condemn people who are like his son.

Now that doesn't mean as you stand there beside Jesus and you look at him, you don't see yourself as falling far short of what he is in his flawless and sinless perfection. But there is a big difference between two rivers, one running this way and one running this way, and two rivers that run this way, even if one of them is muddy and rocky. And if your life is in the same course with Jesus, running in the same direction, it is beside the point that you have mud and rocks in your life.

When you stand there as two streams, two children before the Father, you will have confidence. Because as he is, so are you in the world. Now look at chapter 2 verse 28.

The same flow of thought occurs here. Chapter 2 verse 28. And now little children abide in him so that when he appears, there's the coming in judgment.

We may have confidence. There's the same word is verse 17 and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. So that's the same issue at stake, how to have confidence.

And then comes the link. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right is born of him. In other words, the way to be sure that you are going to pass muster at the judgment day and are in Christ, born of God, is that you are like his son.

Look at chapter 3 verse 2. Same flow of thought. Beloved, we are God's children now. It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know.

Notice the confidence again. We know that when he appears, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is. Now what's the sign of that kind of confidence? How do you know if you're in that category? Next verse.

Everyone who has this kind of confidence, everyone who hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. As he is, so are you in the world. To sum up verse 17, I would paraphrase it like this.

When you love each other with love that is more than just talk, that is, when the love of God reaches its practical goal of action in your life and is thus perfected, you will experience a deep, unshakable confidence before God. Much talk and few deeds destroys assurance. We've all experienced it.

I have two kinds of days. One kind of day, you get up and you enter your day and opportunities for love, whether it's at the kitchen table or whether it's at the church or whether it's in visitation in the hospital or on the road, arise. And for some horrible reason, you're so wrapped up in yourself that the pleasures of avoiding love are larger than the pleasures of loving in your assessment.

And you just stay right in your little cocoon. You come to the end of the day. How do you feel before God? You kneel down to pray before God.

You have confidence in God. You have great boldness before the throne after a day like that. You're like baloney, deader than a doornail, scared stiff.

What kind of a rotten no good am I? Am I real anyway? Then there's another kind of day. You go through the day and you get up and you meet God. He fills your life with the confidence of his love and his power.

And you enter the day and forces start meeting you through the day. And you have the wherewithal by the power of the Holy Spirit to deny yourself, get outside your comfort zone and invest some time for other people. And even if it wrecks your whole schedule, you come to the end of the day and you kneel before God.

And how do you feel? Power. You know he's there. He's shown it in your life.

You have boldness before God and you could meet people without fear. I think what John wants to do is get us to live that way as a normal lifestyle. So that our normal daily routine produces confidence that we can stand before him at the judgment day in Christ.

Verse 18. Seems to me that these two verses are saying the very same thing. One positively and one negatively.

Verse 17 positively. Have confidence in the day of judgment. Verse 18 negatively.

Don't have any fear in the day of judgment. And both give the same answer as to how to avoid fear and get confidence. Perfected love.

And it just baffles me why the New International Version switches language. The New International Version very helpfully translated perfect complete in verse 17. And very unhelpfully switched back to perfect in verse 18.

As though there were two different Greek words behind it. Gets everybody confused who uses that version. At least the other versions are consistent and translate it perfect throughout.

Because the verb perfected in verse 18 and the verb perfected in verse 17 are not only the same word. They're the same form of the same word. There is nothing new going on in verse 18 except to say it negatively instead of positively.

Look at the last phrase of verse 17. You can see that that's just the opposite, can't you? The negative side of verse 18. If you're not perfected in love, you have fear.

Or those who fear are not perfected in love. It's just the opposite of saying, verse 18, if you have perfected love, you don't fear, you have confidence. I don't see how anybody can see something new or very different in verse 18.

The first part of the verse says there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment. In other words, the reason there's no fear in love is that there's no threat of punishment for being a loving person.

Nobody has ever performed an act of love and had his conscience say, you're going to get it for this. There are no threats of punishment when you love. No flags are waved, red flags, punishment on the way, when you're on your way to the hospital to help.

Just great confidence and assurance that you're in the right way. And so, since fear has to do with punishment and no punishment is threatened against love, love doesn't have any fear in it. You can love people all day long and never experience fear that God is going to zap you for it.

On the contrary, when you love all day long with perfect love, and please get out of your mind flawless love, but active love. When you love with active love, implemented love, accomplishing love, deed love, and not just talk love, but walk love, fear is taken like a big boulder and cast out of your heart. There's a very active phrase here, thrown outside.

If you have fear in your heart this morning, you want to get it out? Love somebody this afternoon. Isn't that amazing? If you love, then you have a deep, profound, subjective assurance that God is at work and you are his child and he will not condemn you on the judgment day. And if you fail in love all the time, you won't ever have the assurance of salvation.

Let me close with an illustration of the way this worked in the life of David Livingston, the missionary. He came to Cambridge in 1857 to talk to the students after he had been in Africa for many years and he was trying to muster the forces. The way he tried to muster the forces was by telling them, look, I've laid down my life in Africa all by myself in all the diseases and all the loneliness and all the dangers.

And brothers, it's no great sacrifice. And then here's the way he explained it. He said, is that a sacrifice which brings its own blessed reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Now, I've read that a dozen times.

I've quoted it in many things I've said and written, and I never noticed what a beautiful. Acting out an illustration, that is of the logic of First John for 17 and 18. Notice, I'll read it again, so you watch it.

He says, brothers, look, I've been I've been pouring my life out in love to these people in Africa for the last decades. It's cost me a lot. It's no big sacrifice.

And here's why. Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blessed reward in healthful activity? And there's perfected love. Here comes the second one and the consciousness of doing good.

So there's the introspection that says, how am I doing? And sees that you're doing perfected love, that is active love. I'm laying my life down for these people day after day after day. And so I have a consciousness of doing good and it thrills me.

And so what does it lead to? Number three, peace of mind. And what is that? But John's verse 18, no fear. And the fourth one, and to a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter.

And what is that? But verse 17, that you can have confidence on the day of judgment. You've all experienced things like this. You know that when you yield to the power of the Holy Spirit and He enables you to do practical deeds of kindness and love, you feel confidence before God.

Power in the Holy Spirit. Fearlessness before men. And when you don't, when you're all wrapped up in yourself and you go through the day trying to increase your levels of security in the world and trying to

surround yourself with more and more comforts, you come to the end of the day weak, uncertain, insecure, and powerless before men.

So I think that one of the main reasons professing Christians today are so weak before God, so lacking in bold confidence in prayer and faith, and so weak before men is that in fact we really are all wrapped up in ourselves instead of pouring ourselves out for the eternal good of other people. And so if you ask at the end of the hour now, well, that's exactly what I am this morning, so what am I going to do about it? I want to close by drawing your attention to verse 19. We love because He first loved us.

Don't construe anything that I have said this morning or anything this book says to mean you can love your way into the love of God. You can't.

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