

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

Psalms 119:113-120; 1 John 4:12-21

I think people want a system by which they imagine they can hold life together. I think it is in our nature to find something that works, some habit or plan or practice that gets us what we need, and we take that ideology to heart, the power of positive thinking, the seven habits of an effective fill-in-the-blank, how to win friends and influence people, the six things I learned in kindergarten. So it has ever always been, and the presumption underlying the system is that it's us. The call we make, the procedure we run will make or break us depending on its quality and our commitment to it.

And that's not too far wrong! After all, John has already taught us that with a faith in Jesus comes a world of commandments and disciplines, habits and principles that, if we observe them, will keep us in an area code where God can bless us and use us to bring beauty and order and discipline and purpose to our own lives and families and churches and friends. After all, Jesus said, *"If you love me, you'll keep my commandments."* And the original Jesus, Joshua, who took over after Moses failed to get God's people over the border and into the Promised Land, Joshua was even more dramatic.

Fourteen hundred years before our Jesus, Joshua told God's people, the Israelites: *"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night that you may be careful to do all that is written in it. For then will you make your way prosperous and then will you have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Don't be frightened and don't be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go!"* So, listen to Joshua and you could be tempted to think that it is us! Master the Law! Work the commandments! Stop being a sissy and double down and do it again, and God will get you where you need to go.

The only problem being that at the heart of the Law is this notion that it isn't us after all! So Solomon teaches that it isn't us being big and strong and masterful and confident, instead he says: *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge ... Don't be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn from evil. It will bring healing to your bodies and refreshment to your bones... The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."*

So I guess it's both! Part of it is us, there are commandments to master and disciplines to keep and principles to mind, but in the midst of all that is this notion of fear. That God is different,

bigger, better and wiser than us, that even at the top of our game, we need to be afraid. Because there are forces on the loose, factors in the game, things we don't know, things we can't reach that can break us if God didn't intervene with mercy and help to keep our lives from slipping into the gears.

John put it this way, he said, *"No one has seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."* So John's notion of how to get to where God can help us, is that we love those awkward, difficult people he's placed around us in church. God is with us, John teaches us, he *"abides"*, his love is *"perfected"* when we make time and place to love each other in the give and take of ordinary life. So any system that doesn't lead us there, any procedure that doesn't lead us to heal and forgive and love and serve the brothers and sisters here in church isn't going to land us anywhere near God either. And ironically what John writes about us in his letter is an echo of what he'd already written about Jesus in his gospel.

In John 1:18, he wrote, *"No one has seen God at any time, but the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed God to us."* You see, beginning with Moses, the prophets of Israel had seen a parade of terrifying visions of God, visions that left them cowering on their faces, hoping to survive the wind and rain and lightning and fire that swirls around the Almighty. But when the Father wanted us to see the whole picture of his glory, then, he put a baby in a manger, sent a young boy to his Father's house, showed us a carpenter in work duds, and then God let the disciples touch and hold and hear and see Jesus, his Only Begotten, in relationships where Jesus loved people and people loved him. And why was this different look at God necessary? Because knowing only that God is big and strong and scary isn't enough.

"God is love." John tell us, *"and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him."* It follows that all that sound and fury the prophets saw was meant to evoke a fear that leads to love. John has already written, *"By this we know that we abide in him and him in us, by the Spirit he has given us. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son, Savior of the world!"*

The *"we"* John refers to here are his guys, the apostles, who were there when Jesus fed the 5000 and walked on water and raised Lazarus from the dead and rose from the dead himself. They were there when he sent the Spirit with tongues of fire to settle on their brows and to set their tongues in motion saying things they'd never known in languages they'd never learned.

And the first reaction to all this sound and fury and motion when it happened was almost always fear. *"Who is this guy?"*, the disciples used to say to each other, *"What does this mean?"* And the point is that the fear they felt opened their hearts to the love Jesus wanted to show them. John put it this way, he said, *"So we have come to know and believe the love that God has for us."*

God is love and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him.” That’s why a baby in a manger, or a man who you could touch and hold and hear and see was necessary to fill out our picture of who God is and what he’s like.

And the point John goes on to make is that the way for us to know and love and follow God now is to engage in the same sort of love relationships that Jesus worked at with the men and women who followed him up and down the Judean countryside for three years. Because Jesus did more with these people than signs and wonders and miracles. He loved them in the give and take of finding food to eat and places to rest and handling money and just plain getting along.

Because as wonderful as the signs and wonders were, more wonderful than the resurrection and the descent of the Spirit, was the ordinary love that each and all of the disciples learned from Jesus in the give and take of their ordinary travels. John never even used his own name in his own gospel. He always called himself the disciple Jesus loved. So here in his letter John writes, *“By this love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence on the day of judgment, because as is Christ, so are we in this world.”*

The point being that it’s not the system. It’s not us. The habits and disciplines, the principles and the commandments are important and necessary. They mark boundaries and measure character but they’re not the heart of the matter. John writes, *“There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.”* So the commandments and principles and habits and disciplines weren’t given as a system by which we can master life and tame God.

They were given as a way to soften and open our hearts to the meaning and necessity of love. The rhythms of weekly worship and daily devotions, the focus of our attentions and affections to our marriages and families, the necessity of putting church and kingdom first over and against big wide menu of what the world wants us to do, all these priorities and restrictions, all these commands and disciplines were given to teach us what it will take, what it actually means for us to love God and love each other. But the point of the matter is the love.

We have long made the mistake of thinking that love consists of the feelings that arise only after we have set the priorities and made the decision to love; feelings like warmth, kindness, closeness, joy. The point of the commandments is to teach us that the decision comes first. The feelings can only safely grow once the boundaries and priorities are set.

It is the fear of losing God’s love that teaches us to treasure it if we should ever find it. But once we’ve treasured it, once we’ve taken to heart the commandments that bring us into the area code,

then all the reasons to be afraid gradually erode away. John writes, *“For fear has to do with punishment, and the one who fears has not been perfected in love.”*

This word, *“perfect”*, that John uses in this passage does not mean, I don’t think, flawless or sinless so much as it means mature or full. And the point is that it is by the practice of love over time that we learn to trust in the love that brought us to God and to church in the first place.

John explains, *“We love because God first loved us.”* The point being that none of us gets close to God because we’ve flawlessly worked a fool proof system. We get close to God because God chose to love us before fear or loneliness or need or danger ever propelled us to reach for him. He loved us before any of us ever got good at anything. And the first and best way to get close to him is to love him back, by which I mean to make him a priority, to focus our thoughts and affections on him and then on the people he commands us to love.

Because it’s possible to put on quite a show of piety and discipline without ever learning to open and focus one’s heart in love. The proof of whether we really love God is in the quality of the relationships we forge with each other. Or as John put it, *“...he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”*

Because to really be loved and forgiven and helped by God is to extend all that to the people around us who need it, as best we can as we learn the art over time. The good news being that God isn’t asking for perfection in a particular moment. He knows we can’t do that! What he commands is that we persevere at loving him and loving each other over time. Because it is *“perfect love”*, mature, stable, practiced love that casts out fear. John concludes, *“...this commandment we have from him: he who loves God must also love his brother.”*