

- e. Christians have been perfected in love in the sense that God’s love has attained its eternal goal in them. His love has created a new human community of true children through the life and work of the incarnate Son, made effectual by His Spirit. The perfecting of the divine love is thus evident in sons and daughters defined by love just as God Himself is. These children share God’s life and nature through union with the Son through the renewing Spirit, and so also His heart and purpose for His creation; “as He is, so also are we in this world” (4:17).

God is love, so that the church that dwells in love, dwells in God and God in it. By making the church the dwelling place of the Father and the Son, the Spirit makes the church participate in the concrete embodiment of the love of God in the incarnate Son. It is in that indwelling and love that the church has its essential life. Love in the church is precisely its participation in the humanity of Jesus Christ, for he is the love of God poured out for mankind. In him the church is rooted and grounded in love, and in him it becomes itself a communion of love through which the life of God flows out in love toward every human being. As He is, so we are in this world.” (Torrance)

This understanding of the divine work of love and the Christian’s relationship to it underlies John’s assertion in v. 18: “*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.*” The reason this background is important is that people often treat John’s statement narrowly and in isolation, which tends to leave them focusing on the issue of fear and how it relates to the Christian’s life and relationship with God. This type of approach becomes especially troublesome when John’s words are compared with other scriptural instruction that makes the fear of God foundational and even essential to a right relationship with Him (cf. Deuteronomy 6:1-15; Psalm 19:9; Proverbs 1:7, 9:10; Isaiah 11:1-4; Acts 9:31; Romans 3:9-18; 2 Corinthians 5:1-11; 1 Peter 1:14-17, 2:17; etc.). From this perspective, it seems that John is contradicting Paul and Peter, not to mention God Himself, as He instructed the sons of Israel concerning their relationship with Him.

But treated in context, no such contradiction exists, for John wasn’t speaking of the “fear of the Lord” in the sense of the above citations, but the fear that exists in the absence of love and that is antithetical to love. This is clear from John’s initial assertion: *There is no fear in love.* John stated this in absolute terms, and then went further. Not only is fear antithetical to love, love that is perfect – i.e., pure, complete and whole as it is in God Himself – actually drives out all fear. Love will not abide fear; to the contrary it triumphs over it so as to utterly dispel it.

Love and fear cannot coexist, and the reason is that fear arises from a certain relational dynamic: “*Fear involves punishment.*” Fear is grounded in and reflects *estrangement*, and so is the essential quality of man’s natural (fallen) relationship with God (note Genesis 3:6-10). In their natural state, all people exist in a state of fear and hiding, seeking to avoid the true God and the truth of their alienation from Him and its consequence in death and judgment (ref. Hebrews 2:14-15).

John here expressed the relationship between fear and punishment in an unusual way. Literally, he wrote that fear *has* punishment, which has been interpreted as fear *involving, including* or *bringing* punishment, or even fear as *itself* punishment. Since the context suggests that this punishment is associated with the future day of judgment (v. 17), many believe John's point was that fear concerns punishment in the sense that it *anticipates* it. This fear, then, contrasts the confidence (assurance) that marks those in whom God's love has been perfected.

Almost certainly John had future judgment in view in verse 18, but his language suggests that he was making a more profound point.

- Yes, the specter of future punishment in a coming day of judgment can (and does) provoke fear, but, again, John stated that fear *has* punishment, indicating that fear itself somehow *possesses* or *embodies* punishment.
- It seems then, that John was highlighting the truth that fear – whatever provokes it – is its own punishment; it is an enslaving and debilitating power that works toward the destruction of the person subject to it.

And so, while the fear John referred to certainly anticipates a future day of reckoning, it involves a very real aspect of punishment *in the present*. Fear shackles, oppresses and destroys its subject, and so is antithetical to the freedom, wholeness and well-being that belong to the children begotten of God's love (John 8:31-36; Romans 8:14-17, 20-21; Galatians 5:1; Hebrews 2:14-15). In John's words, "*the one who fears has not been perfected in love.*"

- f. God's love triumphs over fear, but it does so as it reproduces itself in those it rescues. Because human fear is grounded in alienation from God, reconciliation with Him vanquishes it. But because reconciliation has its goal in sonship, *the end of fear means the beginning of a life characterized by love*. God's design wasn't simply to end the alienation and enmity between Himself and His image-bearers, but to see them attain the destiny for which He created them. The goal of atonement and reconciliation is a sonship in which human beings are image-children in truth – children who share their Father's life and nature. This is why fear and love cannot coexist: The latter dispels the former, even as it dispels the form of human existence that engenders fear. By divine design, love's work goes beyond addressing fear and its enslaving power. Love vanquishes fear by producing sons, and sons are defined by love, even as their Father is: So John's climactic statement: "*We love, because He first loved us*" (4:19).
- g. And because God's love produces children who share in His loving nature, it is impossible that they should not be characterized by love, anymore than God Himself should fail to love. First and foremost, the children love their Father. And they do so, not simply as their rightful response to His love, but *intrinsically*, as sons in the Son; they love the Father as image-children sharing in the life and likeness of the Son who is one with the Father in nature, heart, mind and purpose.

And this relationship with the Father explains why it's impossible to truly love Him and not love other Christians: *whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him* (5:1b). Christians are children who share the Father's life and nature; how, then, can such a one love *Him* and not love those *in Him*? The failure of love among Christians has always been a problem, but John likely had in mind the lovelessness of the Gnostic "Christians" who were hating the Father's children by leading them away from Him, even while claiming to know and love Him.

This is supported by John's explanation that one cannot love God whom he *cannot see* and not love his brother whom he *does see* (4:20). Inherent in Gnostic spirit/flesh dualism is the doctrine that deity is immaterial and cannot take any material form (hence the Docetic and Cerinthian conceptions of Jesus as the Christ). For a Gnostic, it's absurd to speak of *seeing* God. On the other hand, people are material beings that are seen, and so must be distinguished from deity. Gnostic dualism imposes an absolute distinction between God and His human creatures, and this pertains to love as well: It is necessary (as well as proper) to love God in a way that one doesn't love other human beings.

But John didn't make any such distinction; he recognized that love is *one*. A reader will search in vain for anything in John's writings that suggests that he acknowledged the existence of different species of love. There is love as it is true in God and there is the absence of love (which John termed *hatred* – 4:20a). Those who love, love with the one and same love, whether it's directed toward God or human beings. And so there are two bases for John's assertion in 4:20:

- The first is the *nature of Christian existence* – the fact that Christians share mutually in God's life and nature. When one sees his Christian brother or sister, he is seeing the image of God Himself. How then, can He love God and not his brethren? How can he love the God he's never seen and not love those who tangibly manifest that God?
 - The second is the *nature of love itself* – the fact that love is one. In a crucial sense, a person either loves or he doesn't; either love is true of him or it isn't. This doesn't deny that people love imperfectly and inconsistently, but no one can be defined by love and hate at the same time. All who are born of God are defined by love just as He is (4:7-8).
- h. Both of these considerations underlie John's claim that it's by loving God and obeying Him that a person knows that he loves God's children (5:2). Obedience is simply the obligation of love – first and foremost, love for God. And love for God will express itself in love for His children. *In the end, the commandment to love is simply the obligation of authenticity that God rightly imposes on His children* (4:21). Just as He is who He is, so it is to be with them. And when the children live out the love that is intrinsic to their sonship, they show themselves to be true brethren of Jesus – brethren who, like Him, can affirm that seeing them is seeing the Father. Thus obedience is love (5:3) and love is obedience (3:21-24).