

Sermon 42, Perfect Love Is With Us, 1 John 4:17-18

Proposition: God’s love goes with us everywhere we go, changing our identity to “beloved” and making our hearts fearless.

- I. Love Is With Us, v. 17
 - A. We Have Boldness on Judgment Day
 - B. We Are Like Christ, the Beloved
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- II. Love Is Perfected With Us, vv. 16-18
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have been looking over and over at the reality of mutual abiding that John teaches in this book. This morning, John takes that teaching and translates it in terms of love. Love is with us, he says. We already knew that God was with us, and that God is love. But today we want to look at the consequence of that — namely, that love is with us and that it changes our identity and frees us from fear.

I. Love Is With Us, v. 17

The first point I want to make to you this morning is that love is with us. Again, notice the corporate emphasis. Love is with me, and it is with you. But most of us, love is with *us*, gathered together as the people of God.

A. We Have Boldness on Judgment Day

Because love is with us, we have boldness on judgment day. That is John’s first word about what love being with us does. He has already introduced this theme, back in ch. 2 — how we could have confidence and not shrink in shame at His coming. Now, though, we hear the theme played again. Because God’s love is with us, we need not worry about judgment day. Yes, we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive the things done in the body. That means, I think, that our closeness (or lack thereof) will be affirmed and finalized in some sense. It’s not that the Christian needs to fear condemnation, or going to Hell, or even going to purgatory. Rather, the “sentence” or verdict of the final judgment will simultaneously affirm that we are welcome in Christ and also that our effort and love during this life mattered, and will keep mattering for eternity. Thus, we can have boldness going into judgment day because we know that love is with us, and that there is no possibility of condemnation or rejection. There is a possibility that we will have to answer for what we did in this life, explaining and repenting for

our sins, but we will certainly hear “Well done, good and faithful servant.” The reason we will hear it is because love is with us.

B. We Are Like Christ, the Beloved

That love, in turn, changes our identities. It makes us like Christ the beloved.

Brothers and sisters, love is the first and greatest reality in human life. It was love that brought your parents together. It was love that led your mother to carry you and feed you and care for you all through that long childhood that you had. It was love that woke you up and made you human, as your parents bonded with you, cared for you, comforted you, and trained you about your place in the world. It was love that gave you the identity you have today. Of course, that identity can be and likely has been damaged in some ways by lack of love on the part of others, and your own lack of love in response. But John is telling us that the ultimate lack of love, the alienation between us and our Creator due to our sin, is healed in Jesus because love is with us. And the presence of love is what gives us not only our biopsychosocial life, but also our spiritual life. You are beloved. That is who you are, because as Jesus is, you are too. Love is with Him, for the Father who is love begot Him before all worlds. And that same paternal love is therefore with you too, though you were begotten not before all worlds but rather within time, perhaps in the last few days or the last few years, or maybe decades ago — but still, the reason you were begotten is that God loves you and wants you for His child. You are accepted in the beloved. You are beloved. You are one of the favorites of the Heavenly King.

How does it change you to know that you are beloved? Is this is an identity you claim and live within? At the heart of the universe, the person whose opinion is most important to you and to every other human being thinks well of you. He delights in you. He wants what’s best for you, and He is doing it. There is no need for fear, no need for despair. Love is with you, and it has made you beloved. The attitude that God has about you is the attitude you need to have about yourself. How can you share His attitude? Only by spending time with Him, internalizing what He thinks and living it out.

C. We Are in this World

But though love is with us, changing our identity and making us more like Jesus, John reminds us that we are not in Heaven yet. Yes, you’re beloved. Yes, you better act like it. But you’re not everyone’s beloved. The world hates you. John has mentioned it more than once, and he’s going to remind us in the next chapter that the world is run by Satan. You’re definitely not Satan’s beloved. So even though God loves you and is with you, making you beloved like Jesus, there’s a difference between you and Jesus. The difference is that you still live in a hostile, nasty world. And so when the world gets hostile and nasty, don’t freak out. Don’t say, “God, I thought you loved me!” He does love you. But He shows that love by leaving you here in this world to experience what it has to throw at you. We are like Jesus in our status of being loved by God. But we walk that out not on the golden streets of Heaven (yet), but on the muddy streets of Earth.

To borrow a scene from the headlines, imagine that you are a teenage black man, with a strong, loving family. You are definitely beloved, and you know that your parents delight in you

and that your siblings think the world of you. Yet you go out on the mean streets of Racistville, and there you get dirty looks, hear and overhear slurs, experience physical assault, are maybe even taken to jail or killed for no reason.

How do you retain your identity as beloved in the midst of a world that wants to assault you, reject you, dehumanize you? Because brothers and sisters, though that is a prominent challenge for our black brothers and sisters, it is a challenge for every Christian walking the streets of earth. And so, you have to remember that you are beloved where it counts. You are loved where it's important, among those who know you best. It is not our mission to win the world's approval, to get the world to sympathize with us, to show the world that we are nice people too. It's good when that happens. But the world is not our source of approval, not the locus of our affirmation, not the granter of our identity. Even if the world hates and destroys me, I am beloved. God delights in me. He delights in us. And therefore, we must not live in fear, despite everything the world, flesh, and devil can do. They can do a lot. But ultimately, they can't touch us, ch. 5 says. John said this and went into exile on Patmos. He was allegedly boiled in oil and survived. He certainly knew the world's opposition.

How do we survive the world's hatred? Ultimately, God's voice and approval has to mean more to us than the world's voice and approval does. If you care that the world hates you, if you can't stand that feeling, then you are not yet looking to God for your final approval.

II. Love Is Perfected With Us, vv. 16-18

But you can and must look to Him for that final approval. As John says, God's love is actually perfected with us. His love comes to completion in our lives when it achieves its goal. Remember, love wants what's best for the beloved. For God's love to come to perfection, it must have its desire fulfilled. It must evoke love in us, as we will see next week. But it must also shape us and teach us to live in this world as beloved even when we are not the world's darlings, indeed, when we are far from being such. So when the world has you down, remember that God's love is with you and is being fulfilled in you, coming to perfection in you as it trains you to be like Jesus.

A. When We Abide in Him, v. 16c

First, then, the passage tells us that God's love is perfected with us when we abide in Him. This is what's best for us; this is what His love desires. And this is what His love has when we confess Christ, believe and know His love, and abide in that love, as we saw last week. God's love is fulfilled when we become the kind of beloveds who abide with Him wherever we are, whatever we are doing. Do you know this kind of communion with the Father? Is praying as natural to you as breathing? Can you not remember the last time you went an hour without talking to Him, the last time you went a day without drinking in His word? I hope so. That's what abiding feels like. And it brings God's love to perfection.

B. When We Walk as Beloved, v. 17

But second, His love is fulfilled when we walk as beloved. That means that we have a perfect confidence about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of the final judgment. How can

one live in such a way? Only by keeping a clean conscience. When we walk as beloved, that means living like God loves you. It means not seeking love and affirmation and pleasure from all the wicked things this world holds out. It means saving yourself for Him, just as you would save yourself sexually for your wife or save yourself gastronomically for the buffet or save yourself physically for the workout at the gym. You have something to live for, someone to satisfy you. Imagine that you have a friend at the coffee shop waiting to meet you and chat — and you stop and talk to the bum outside on the street that you met three doors down from the coffee shop! Do you want to build a relationship with a bum, or are you interested in building the relationship with your beloved friend? Brothers and sisters, to walk as beloved is to live as though you are loved. It means not going around looking for love and pleasure in all the wrong places. It means living from a place of fullness instead of emptiness, a place of generosity instead of a place of neediness.

God's love is perfected when you live like that. Do I live like that? I'm trying. And I know that you are too. Of course in this world we are still weak, still fearful, still needy and empty and less than perfect in love. But we are still living in such a way that God's love is working in us what's best for us.

C. When We Are Free from Painful Fear, v. 18

The biggest result of having God's love come to perfection in us, though, is the one that John highlights in v. 18, even repeating it twice. To live as beloved is to live a life free from fear. Now, obviously John is not speaking absolutely, in an unlimited sense. He doesn't think that a truly beloved Christian has no fear of traffic, or of being socially ridiculous, or of getting hurt by dangerous things (a chapsaw, an out-of-control state, etc.). That's not his point. He's not saying that if you were a real Christian, you would be Evil Knievel and happily leap the Grand Canyon on a motorcycle. Instead, he is talking about the kind of fear that cripples your life, that warps and twists and renders you less yourself, less human, less kind and generous and loving. That is, he's talking about the fear which is the opposite of love. Not all fear is this kind of fear. We are told of the Messiah that His delight will be in the fear of the LORD. And indeed, the fear of the Lord is a fear that twists us into shape, a force that bends us toward what we were made to be. But the kind of fear that hurts, the kind of fear that cripples and twists and harms — that's the fear that Jesus frees us from through His love. Even in the face of a hostile world, we can be free of this kind of fear, because we know that God is in control and that He will do what is best for us. This doesn't mean that the true Christian skydives without a parachute or loves crawling through tiny tunnels far underground. But it does mean that the true Christian is open, joyful, warm and kind and loving precisely because he is free of the painful kind of fear.

If you have the hurtful kind of fear, you do not yet love perfectly. But when you truly love God as He is, when you genuinely delight in Him, when your love for Him is fulfilled in perfect communion with Him — then you will indeed know perfect love. Until that time, fear not. You are beloved. Love is with you. Because Jesus died, you have nothing to fear in an ultimate sense. Yes, there are still dangers and fearsome things out there. But you need not be

warped by them. You need not be shaped by them. The thing that gives you an identity is not your status as prey, as victim, as sin-ridden scoundrel. No. The source of your identity is that God loves you. And if you know that, really know it, fear cannot touch you. You will still fear harmful things, but in a controlled way. Your fear will be appropriate, not life-dominating and certainly not life-defining.

Faithful is He who called you. He will bring it to pass. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, amen.