

## Fear, Confidence, and Loving Faithfulness

As we turn our attention to the Epistle lesson for this morning, we hear John speaking in terms of *confidence and fear*. This confidence, as he plainly tells us, is a result of a love that is perfected with us. Having a perfected love, he says, we can face the day of judgment with confidence; with no fear. After all, there is no fear in a perfected love, right? Fear, as he says, has to do with punishment, which means that whoever fears has not been perfected in love. *Okay... I know for a fact that I don't have a perfect love!* I don't love God perfectly, and I certainly don't love my neighbor perfectly. That's a problem! Whoever loves God must also love his brother, right? If anyone says *"I love God, and yet still hates his brother, he is a liar."* Doesn't that scare you... even a little bit? *It should.*

Maybe we need to start by addressing what John is really saying here. You see, this English translation is kind of poor. *Ask yourself: Who has a perfect love?* It's not possible; not for us fallen children of Adam! If it were possible, then Jesus didn't need to die on that cross! Why would He if we were capable of loving perfectly? Just try harder!

That word that we translate as "perfected" (*teleiou*) carries with it the meaning of "accomplished, completed, fulfilled." It speaks to the attainment of a goal; reaching a goal. The Greek word *telos* (which is the root word for *teleiou*) refers to "the ending place; the goal." Heaven is the *telos* for the children of God. It should come as no surprise that *teleiou* also points us to *tetelestai*, the word that Jesus spoke victoriously from His cross, *"It is finished!"* Mission accomplished. The goal has been attained. With all this in mind, a more proper translation of this text would sound like this: *"God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. In this has this love been brought to its goal with us, so that we may have boldness/confidence in connection with the day of judging because even as that One is, we on our part also are (although we are still) in this world."*

Okay... so maybe that doesn't quite clear things up just yet. Let's come at it from a John 3:16 and 1 Corinthians 13 perspective. God is love, right? It doesn't say that God is loving (which He is). **God IS love.** Scripture is very clear on this. God so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son, right? **Jesus Christ is God's love in the flesh!** If I have all the gifts and abilities in the world; if I can speak in all tongues and move mountains, and yet I don't have Christ—the love of God—I've got nothing. I am nothing. Apart from Christ, I am lost and condemned—plain and simple.

This is why John, here in this Epistle text, is very deliberate in saying that the love of God *attains its goal with us* when we abide in Him; when we abide in Christ Jesus—the love of God in the flesh. This is the goal/will of God. ***He is the goal. Jesus is the telos; the destination; the ending place for saving faith.*** We abide/dwell in Him, and He abides/dwells in us.

Now comes the good Lutheran question: What does this mean? More specifically, what does this mean for us? John answers this. The result of abiding in Christ and He abiding in us is the ***confidence of saving faith; the peace and assurance of saving faith.*** I want you to think about this. There is no fear when you are abiding in Christ. Where Christ stands, the devil must flee. There is no fear when Christ is standing with you; when Christ abides in you. And let me be clear before I go any further, this fear John speaks of isn't referring to the natural gift of fear that God gives us; the fear that is bound up in our biology. ***This sort of natural/instinctive fear is a good thing.*** It's intended to keep you safe. You should be afraid of standing too close to a crumbling cliff. You should feel some fear when the bullets start flying. But this isn't the fear being referred to in this passage. The fear John speaks of here is the ***fear of condemnation.*** It is the fear of God's eternal wrath and punishment. It is the fear of knowing one's own sinfulness and knowing the eternal wage for that sinfulness.

Now, I know there are some who will immediately scoff at such fearfulness. They ***arrogantly*** boast of their love for God and faith in Jesus. Notice: I didn't say that they ***confidently*** boast. I said that they arrogantly boast. That's a whole different animal, isn't it? That's not good. Remember: The anonymous rich man was quite confident concerning his standing before God. We won't even get into how he confused the abundance of his wealth and prosperity for God's approval/blessing. He was absolutely confident that he was a lock for heaven because he was a good Jew. Just ask him. He'd tell you. He was a child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He said and did all the right things; very pro-Yahweh. ***And yet... he did not abide/dwell in God and His Word.*** He rejected the Word and promise of God, which means that he rejected the love of God. This is plain to see when he tells Abraham, from the fires of hell, to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his five brothers so they don't wind up in hell too. *"They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them."* They have God's Word, from Genesis to Malachi. Let them listen to what God has already said. *"No! That won't do! They need something different!"* To which Abraham responds, *"If they will not hear Moses and the Prophets (God's Word), then they won't be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead."*

Dearly beloved: What has God ***already*** said about His abiding presence with us? What has God already said about His very real presence in Word and Sacrament? ***Here is Immanuel!*** How can you be abiding in the love of God; how

can you be abiding in Christ, if you won't be where He is? Understand: I'm not saying all this to make anyone think they're going to hell. I don't want anyone to doubt their salvation, purchased for them with the blood of the only Son of God. ***What I am trying to do is instill a very healthy, repentant fear of God in you.***

As I said at the beginning: I know the reality of my sins. I know the wage of my sins. I also know the font and source of my salvation; my deliverance from the justly-deserved damnation and condemnation for my sins. My very healthy repentant fear drives me to my Lord and Savior. I flee to Him in order to abide in His assurance of mercy and grace and complete forgiveness. I abide in Him, and my God and Lord abides with me. His Holy Spirit—***the Comforter***—does exactly that: He comforts me. By grace through faith, the Holy Spirit opens my ears to hear and hold fast to the Words and Promises of my Lord and Savior. The Holy Spirit works the gift of saving faith in me through the hearing of the Word of God, instilling in me the ***confidence and blessed assurance that I AM baptized into Christ***. I am completely forgiven in Christ and because of Christ. God so loved me that He sent His only-begotten Son to die for me and my sins. *“It is finished”* was spoken for me!

I know the reality of my sins, but I do not fear God's wrath and judgment. I am forgiven in Christ. It is finished. As Christ is right now—fully and perfectly beloved by the Father—***so also am I***, even as I am still in this world, bearing crosses as I slog through this dark vale of tears and sorrows. Even as God's perfect love is completely and fully with Jesus, that same perfect love walks arm in arm with me. That same love will never leave me or forsake me. That same love promises to ever and always abide with me. *“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me.”* Abiding in the victorious love of God that is the crucified and resurrected Christ, the coming judgment brings me no fear, not out of a synergistic, works-righteous, entitlement kind of arrogance/false confidence, but solely out of the confidence of repentant faith in the all-atoning work and person of the love of God Himself—Jesus Christ.

Dearly beloved in Christ: God so loved ***you*** that He gave His only-begotten Son to die for ***you*** and for all ***your*** sin as well as for the sins of the entire world. It is finished, in Christ and because of Christ. As Christ is right now—fully and perfectly beloved by the Father—***so also are you***, even though you are still in this world, bearing your crosses as you slog through this dark vale of tears and sorrows.

I pray that the Gospel truth of God's unmerited and unconditional love for you gives you comfort and peace and blessed confidence so that you are able to bear your crosses without fear or doubt. No matter how bad things may seem, God loves you, in Christ and because of Christ. I pray that you never doubt this or fear

that it isn't true. I also pray that this Gospel truth of God's love for you in Christ means something to you. I pray that it produces the good fruits of love; love that loves God by actually striving to be with Him where He's at; where He calls you to be; love that doesn't offer up empty lip-service or goes through the motions, but a love that actually strives to *show forth and tell of the love of God* that He has for you and all people in Christ; a love that loves God by actually loving your neighbor/brother; by loving all others in the same way that God loves you and forgives you.

May this love of God not only be our *telos*—our goal and destination—but also our font and source as well; our beginning, our end, and everything in between. May this love of God in Christ be our motivation, our joy, our confidence and our peace, now and into all eternity.

**AMEN**