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FACING THE JUDGMENT WITH CONFIDENCE

1 John 4:17-21

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1 John Lesson 21

Facing the Judgment with Confidence
1 John 4:17-21

Of all of the important matters in life, none is more vital than the one that John mentions in verse 17—having confidence in the day of judgment. But we need to make sure that our confidence is based on biblical reasons, not on false hope. Polls show that at least 60 percent of Americans believe in hell, but only four percent think there's a good chance that they will go there. Since we're talking about *eternity in the lake of fire*, you need to be sure of where you stand! Since John tells us how to have confidence on that coming day, we all should pay close attention.

In the context, John is giving his final treatment of the test of love. As we've seen, John repeats three tests of authentic Christianity: the moral test of obedience to God's commands; the social test of love for others; and, the doctrinal test of believing the truth about Jesus Christ.

In 4:7-11, John makes the point that we must love one another because God is love and He showed it by sending His Son as the propitiation for our sins. Then (4:12-16) John says that we can be assured that God abides in us and we in Him if we see His Spirit producing in us love for one another and confession of the truth about Jesus Christ.

But John knows that in the matter of loving others, it's easy to be hypocrites. It's easy to sing, "Oh, how I love Jesus," while at the same time our homes are a battle zone. We put on our spiritual masks at church, but in our hearts we harbor bitterness toward a fellow Christian who has wronged us. So John once more hits this vital matter of practical love for one another. John is saying,

Love that comes from God gives us confidence in the day of judgment and must be expressed in love for others in obedience to God's commandment.

By linking love to confidence in the day of judgment, John shows how important it is that we learn practically to love one another. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' comments reinforce just how important

this matter of love should be to every Christian (*The Love of God* [Crossway], p. 172):

Not to be concerned about loving the brethren, not to be concerned as to whether I am dwelling in love or not, is to misunderstand the whole purpose of my salvation, and therefore it is to flout God's love. If this is not the greatest concern of my life, then I am a mere beginner in the Christian life. At the beginning, of course, we have a very great concern about forgiveness; we are very concerned about certain particular sins which may have been evident in our lives before our conversion. But we must not stop at that. The hallmark of the saints is their great, increasing concern about the element of love in their lives.

John's flow of thought here takes some effort to follow. "By this" (4:17) refers back to the last half of 4:16, "God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." By abiding in God and His love, "love is perfected with us." The result of this perfected love (I'll explain that phrase in a moment) is that we will have confidence in the day of judgment. The basis for this confidence is our conformity to the character of Jesus Christ. Then, in 4:18, John gives the negative side of things: If we fear the day of judgment, it is evidence that we have not loved others as God intends. His love is not perfected in us.

Lest we become proud in thinking that we can love others on our own, John goes on to show (4:19) that God is the source of all love. Lest we fall into the hypocrisy of saying that we love God, when in fact we do not practice love for one another, John shows (4:20) that the test of whether we truly love God is our love for one another. He concludes (4:21) by showing that such love, the love that gives us confidence on the day of judgment, is not just a nice suggestion. Rather, it is God's commandment.

1. Practicing the love of Christ gives us confidence in the day of judgment (4:17-18).

John makes four points here:

- A. There will be a day of judgment and it is essential to have biblically based confidence as you face that day.

From beginning to end, the Bible is clear that there is a coming day of judgment. Jesus spoke often about the judgment to come (e.g., Matt. 7:21-23; 11:21-24; 25:31-46). The apostle Paul, preaching to the philosophers in Athens, declared (Acts 17:31) that God “has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” When he talked with the Roman governor Felix, Paul discussed “righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:25).

Death, which is common to the human race, is a judgment for our sin, but it is not the final judgment. Hebrews 9:27 declares, “And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment...” Hebrews goes on to describe it (10:27) as “a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.” The Revelation calls this “the second death, the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14). You can debate about whether the fire is literal or figurative, but either way, you don’t want to experience it for all eternity! You want to have a biblically based confidence as you face that certain day. John shows us here one such basis for confidence:

- B. One basis for confidence in the day of judgment is when we see God’s love flowing through us to others.

John’s emphasis here is on love being *perfected* in us. He first used that phrase in 2:5, where he said, “but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected.” He used it again in 4:12, “if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.” In 4:13-16, John elaborates on the first part of that statement, repeating the concept of God’s abiding in us and we in Him three times. Now, he repeats three times (4:17, 18 [twice]) the concept of perfect love. What does he mean?

The Greek word translated “perfect” does not mean, as in English, to be without any flaws or shortcomings. Rather, the idea is to reach its complete development or intended goal, or to be mature. A helpful reference is James 2:22: “You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was *perfected*.” James means that works complete faith or bring faith to its intended goal.

So when John talks about God's love being perfected in us, he means that His love has reached its intended goal in us. "Perfect" love is not just nice thoughts or words, but action (1 John 3:17-18). John Piper paraphrases the first clause of 4:17, "In this, that is in your love for each other, God's love is put into action and so reaches its appointed goal. It does not remain at the imperfect stage of mere talk, but reaches the stage of action." (<http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/85/052685.html>)

So John is saying that when we see God's love flowing through us to others in practical good deeds, it is one basis for confidence in the day of judgment. In this regard, he is saying essentially the same thing as he said in 3:14, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren." The presence of God's love in your life, not just in words, but in deeds, is evidence that His life is in you and that you are in Him. This is also what John meant in 4:12, "if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected [has reached its goal] in us."

This does not mean that you always love everyone perfectly, without any shortcomings. No one does that! Rather, it means that the direction of your life is growth in love, and not just humanly explainable love, but rather, God's love, which may be defined as, "a self-sacrificing, caring commitment that shows itself in seeking the highest good of the one loved."

This implies that you are involved in close relationships with other believers, where you are committed to work through misunderstandings and hurt feelings. I often talk with people who are struggling in their Christian walk. I discover that they do not know any other believers well enough to meet regularly to help them work through their problems. To love one another, we must get to know one another and also be committed to work through difficulties in our relationships. When you see that kind of love increasing in your life, it gives you confidence in the day of judgment. John goes on to explain why this is so:

C. God's love through us to others gives confidence in the day of judgment because it shows that we are like Jesus.

John adds (4:17b), "because as He is, so also are we in this world." Commentators offer several different interpretations of

that phrase, but in the context it seems to mean, as B. F. Westcott states (*The Epistles of St. John* [Eerdmans], p. 158), "The ground of boldness is present likeness to Christ." John Piper explains (*ibid.*),

The assumption is that at the judgment day God won't condemn people who are like his Son. Living a life of active love shows that we have the Spirit of Jesus. It shows we belong to the family of God. And that gives us confidence before God. You can't live at odds with the character of Jesus and then expect to have any confidence when you stand before his Father at the final judgment.

Note that John does *not* say, "so *should we be*," but rather, "so *are we* in this world." Each of us needs to ask, "Am I at all like Jesus?" Does my life display any resemblance to the love of Jesus in this world? Would others, especially those who live with me, say that they see the love of Christ in my daily behavior?

As I said, such love will not ever be an exact representation of Christ's love, even in the most godly of saints. Love is a fruit of the Spirit, and fruit always takes time and nurture to grow. But, if there's no evidence that the fruit is growing, we need to examine the root to find out if the whole tree is bad. As Jesus said (Matt. 12:33), "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit." If you are not growing in love, you need to ask, "Am I truly born of God?" John goes on to examine the negative side of things:

D. If we fear the day of judgment, it is evidence that we have not loved others as God intends.

John writes (4:18), "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." John is not saying that we should not fear God in the sense of regarding Him with respect and reverence. There is a proper sense of fearing God as the Judge. Speaking in the context of the final judgment, Jesus said (Luke 12:4-5), "My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!"

But in our text, John means that you cannot draw near to God in love and run from Him out of fear of judgment at the same time. God wants His children to know that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). The phrase, “perfect love,” as we’ve seen, means, love that has reached its goal, or love that is expressed in action. If you still fear God’s judgment, at the very least, you are not practicing biblical love for others as you should be doing. That’s what John means when he says, “the one who fears is not perfected in love.”

All of us, at one point in life, should have experienced the fear of God’s judgment. But as you grow in grace and godliness, that fear is replaced by God’s love. The 18th century commentator, Bengel, gives the proper course of growth in the spiritual life: “neither love nor fear, fear without love, both fear and love, love without fear” (cited by Westcott in Latin, p. 160; translated in James Boice, *The Epistles of John* [Zondervan], p. 148).

Most unbelievers have neither the fear of God or the love of God in their lives. Often such lack of fear stems from ignorance. Children are often unafraid of danger because they are not aware of the severity of the danger. Concerning people in their natural state, Paul states (Rom. 3:18, citing Ps. 36:1), “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Unbelievers are a heartbeat away from eternity in the lake of fire, but they don’t fear God!

Then, as the Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin and judgment, they become terrified of God’s wrath and their guilt before Him. At this point, it is “fear without love.” God often uses this to drive them to the cross, where, still trembling, they experience both fear and love. Then, as they grow assured of His grace and see His love working itself out in their lives, they cast out fear and grow into love without fear. John Newton aptly put it, “’Twas grace that caused my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved” (“Amazing Grace,” stanza 2). So John’s point is that as God’s love grows in your life, it casts out the fear of judgment that existed before. God’s love flowing through you is evidence that you are born of God and that evidence removes the fear of God’s judgment.

But John knows that it is easy to get puffed up with pride or to fall into hypocrisy or excuses when it comes to the practical matter of loving others. He addresses these problems in 4:19-21:

2. Love that gives us confidence in the day of judgment comes from God and must be expressed in love for others in obedience to God's commandment (4:19-21).

John makes three points here:

- A. Love that gives us confidence in the day of judgment comes from God (4:19).

Spurgeon has five different sermons on verse 19 alone, so I must be very incomplete here! The original almost certainly reads, "We love, because He first loved us." (The KJV, "We love Him," is based on later manuscripts that copyists altered.) John's point in the context is that if we love God or others to any extent with genuine biblical love, we need to remember that such love did not originate with us. It came from God, who loved us while we were yet sinners. It is evidence that we have experienced His love in a saving way.

One practical application of verse 19 is, if you are struggling to love someone, especially someone who has wronged you, meditate on God's love as it was shown to you at the cross. You did not deserve it in any way. On the contrary, you deserved His wrath and judgment. But in spite of all of your sins, Jesus willingly suffered the penalty that you should have received. Now He wants you to be the channel for His love to other sinners.

But, it's easy to deceive ourselves into thinking that we love God, when in fact we do not. Thus, John continues,

- B. Love that gives us confidence in the day of judgment is validated by our love for one another (4:20).

As usual, John doesn't mince words: "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." As John Stott points out (p. 170), the apostle uses the word *liar* with reference to each of the three tests. With regard to the moral test, he said (2:4), "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." With regard to the doctrinal test, he said (2:22), "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?" Here, he applies it to the social test of love. Stott concludes, "However loudly we may affirm ourselves to be Christian,

our habitual sin, denial of Christ and selfish hatred expose us as the liars we are.”

John’s argument is that we cannot separate the two great commandments. It is easier *to say*, “I love God,” because God is invisible and love for Him may be difficult to observe. But Jesus said (John 14:15), “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” His main commandment is that we love one another (John 13:34; 15:12). So John is saying that genuine love for God necessarily will show itself in observable love for others. If you don’t practice sacrificial, committed love for others, you are revealing that you do not really love God.

But John is not done. He knows that it is easy to make up excuses for our lack of love: “I’ve tried, but this person is impossible to love.” “If you knew how difficult this person is, you’d understand why I don’t love him.” So he shows,

C. Love that gives us confidence in the day of judgment is God’s commandment, not just a nice suggestion (4:21).

The Bible calls them the two great commandments (Matt. 22:36-40), not “the two great suggestions, if you’d maybe like to give it a try.” John reminds us that the commandment comes directly from God (see also, 3:23). This means that we are not free to shrug it off if we claim to be Christians. The fact that love can be commanded shows that it is not primarily a feeling, but rather an action: a caring, self-sacrificing commitment that shows itself in seeking the highest good of the one loved. By God’s grace and in dependence on the Holy Spirit, you *can* and *must* practice such love, even toward those who are difficult to love.

The fact that God commands us to love shows that it is not always effortless or easy. If love just gushed out of us like a mountain spring, then John wouldn’t have labored the point as much as he does. Some of you have experienced deep wounds from those who profess to be Christians. I’m not saying that loving them will be easy, but I am saying that it is not optional. God gave us this commandment, and He didn’t attach a list of exceptions for difficult cases.

Conclusion

An 11 year-old girl and her 8 year-old brother fought over the slightest thing. So their father was surprised when the girl made an artistic card for her brother's birthday. Inside she wrote, "Happy birthday to my nine-year-old brother. I am so glad to have a brother to love. So God gave me you. P.S. Don't read this out loud or I will twist your head off." (*Reader's Digest* [Jan., 1999], p. 78.)

Well, she's got a ways to go, but at least she's working at loving her brother! I encourage you to work at it with those you live with and with those in this church. Remember, the payoff for obedience to this command is that you will have confidence before God in the day of judgment.

Our primary source of confidence is that we have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and His shed blood as the propitiation for our sins. It is only His blood, not our works, that atones for sins. But, how do we know that our faith in Christ is genuine, since it is easy to be deceived? One evidence of genuine faith is when we see God's love flowing through us to others, especially to others that we would not naturally love. The more you see God's love surfacing in your life, the more you will "have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming" (2:28).

Application Questions

1. Some argue that the *only* basis for assurance is faith in Christ, and that to look at our works is misdirected. Agree/disagree?
2. Should believers still fear the day of judgment? Is it possible to be too confident about that day?
3. Does *loving* someone (biblically) require *liking* or *trusting* him? Why/why not? What is the difference?
4. Some teach that you must learn to love yourself before you love others and God. Why is this fallacious?

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