

Series: 1 John

Title:

Text: 1 John 4:16b-21

Date: June 13, 2021

Verse 16b

In the second part of verse 16, John said, “God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him” (1 John 4:16b). The statement “God is love” was a repetition of what John said in verse 8. The apostle knew his readers had need of remembering that love was at the essence of God’s nature.¹ Those who didn’t love (1 John 2:9) made their religious professions doubtful. Many spoke of love in Asia Minor, but few showed it. Romanticizing love would never produce the love of God. If lives were devoid of love, something was amiss.

The ones who truly knew God would demonstrate God’s love to some degree. Though the true Christian may have stumbled in regard to love from time to time, love should have been evident in his or her life. True believers would display a devotion to the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). He or she would be driven by the conviction Paul expressed in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

John’s threefold use of the word rendered “remains” was significant. He wanted to place emphasis on the fact that an abiding relationship with Christ was the means of producing the love of God.² The verb was the same one Jesus used in John 15:4-5. The word literally mean “to have one’s home with.”³ It provided a beautiful picture of the close relationship believers enjoy with the Lord.

John loved to use the word rendered “remains” in his letters to speak of such realities (John 15:4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 16; 1 John 2:6, 10, 14, 19, 24, 27, 28; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24; 4:12, 13, 15). John used the word for the last time in his current letter within our current verse. As he did, he meant to underscore the fact that an intimate connection with Christ is the means by which Christian love is produced in the believer’s life. John’s teaching was in concert with the teaching of Jesus. When our Lord prayed for us, He said: “I made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love you have loved me with may be in them and I may be in them” (John 17:26).

Verse 17

John continued his discussion about Christian love by saying, “In this, love is made complete with us so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, because as he is, so also are we in this world” (1 John 4:17). The word “this” pointed back to the content of the previous verse. John meant to say that an abiding relationship with Jesus, the type of spiritual remaining he spoke of in verse 16, was the means of love being brought to completion in the life of a believer.

The word translated “complete” was the same one used back in verse 12. It depicted the act of something being “finished” or “perfected.”⁴ It spoke of a person or thing reaching an intended goal. John’s use of the word was a clear reference to the process of Christian maturity. Jesus used a cognate of the same word to speak of sanctification in Matthew 5:48. James did too in James 1:4. Paul did as well in Ephesians 4:13. Though no one will be fully perfect on Earth (Philippians 3:12 and 1 John 3:1-2), each Christian should seek after a growth

¹ Beacon, 393.

² Akin, 185.

³ Ross, 205.

⁴ Robertson, 235.

in love that will make them more complete and mature in the faith. Earlier, John indicated that an abiding relationship with Jesus was the key to such development (1 John 4:16). His teaching was in alignment with that of our Lord (John 15:3-8).

“Confidence” was important for the true believers of Asia Minor. False teachers were making them insecure concerning their status before the Lord. The language of our current verse encouraged the real believers to stand with a spiritual attitude of boldness, openness, and assurance.⁵ John used the same language from our current verse back in 1 John 2:28 and 3:21 to similarly encourage boldness in the face of heresy. Such boldness was the ever-present right and privilege of God’s children (Joshua 1:6-9; Acts 4:13, 29; Ephesians 3:12; Hebrews 4:16).

Christian confidence doesn’t come from self. It isn’t based on an unhealthy, man-centered presumptuousness concerning one’s abilities or accomplishments. It is rooted and grounded in Christ. John indicated as much in verse 17 with the words translated “as he is.” The phrase pointed to the source of spiritual confidence — Christ. Christian boldness, as one has noted, is not presumption.⁶ It is an inwrought spiritual courage that comes from the finished work of Christ on the cross (Ephesians 3:12 and 2 Corinthians 3:12). Christians can have a healthy and holy overcoming air about them because Christ has overcome the world (1 John 4:4).

If believers lived in Christ’s love, they would have a degree of holy confidence “in the day of judgment.” The judgment of which John spoke was eschatological (1 Corinthians 3:12-15, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Revelation 20:11-15). There is coming a day in which humanity will be judged regarding to works. The Lord will evaluate each Christian based on the genuineness of his or her sanctification and service for the Lord. John previously reminded his readers of their need for boldness in the face of the Lord’s judgment (1 John 2:28). He mentioned judgment again in our previous verse in order to encourage the church toward Christian love.

The development of such boldness is important when one considers our natural tendencies. By default, all of humanity lives under a constant barrage of guilt and shame because of sin.⁷ A fear of future judgment is a part of our natural state (Genesis 3:7-8). Apart from God’s grace, we are all like the lost people of Revelation 6:16-17, hiding from the presence of God out of fear of His wrath. Paul described believers as being “children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). Sure, some deaden the inwrought fear of God’s judgment. Through continued sin and depravity, they silence their God-given conscience (Romans 1:28-32). However, such hardening of the heart is the exception to God’s rule. Humanity naturally dreads the judgment of God. Knowing this, John aimed to console his readers. They did not need to fear as everyone else feared. Because of Christ, God’s love, and the Great Commandment, they had been released from the fear of judgment.

The last phrase of verse 17 is one that is easy to overlook. John said, “because as he is, so also are we in this world.” The apostle meant to remind his readers that love was a pathway for bearing great witness for Jesus. His teaching conjured memories of Jesus’ words. Our Lord taught that love is the great evangelistic tool that the church possesses. In John 13:35, He said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” In John 17:23, He prayed on behalf of the church, saying, “May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me.” When others see God’s love displayed through the church, they will see a living evidence of gospel truth. Such is the purpose of the church. One has said, “We are in this world to

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 598.

⁶ Ross, 206.

⁷ Calvin, 245.

manifest Christ.”⁸ Another has said, “What God then in heaven is, such he bids us to be in the world.”⁹ It is for this reason that John placed such emphasis on love. He knew that a loss of love would lead to a loss of gospel witness.

Verse 18

John elaborated further on the believer’s confidence in Christ, saying, “There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. So the one who fears is not complete in love” (1 John 4:18). The words “perfect love” were a reference to the maturity of Christian love in one’s life (Matthew 22:37-40 and 1 Corinthians 13:13). John spoke of such maturation previously in 1 John 4:12 and 17. Love is the path to Christian maturity and completion. It is the goal of all spiritual growth.

According to John, those who had become mature in Christ’s love didn’t have to live under the shadow of inordinate “fear.” The word “fear” was one that spoke of “dread.”¹⁰ Interestingly, it was the first word of the sentence in the original Greek. The text literally read, “Fear not is in love.”¹¹ John wanted his readers to unequivocally know that fear was vanquished by Christ. His readers had no need to cower in the face of their adversaries.

The apostle said mature Christian love “drives out fear.” The language of the text was strong. A.T. Robertson said it involved “a powerful metaphor.”¹² The original Greek used a compound word that meant “to turn out of doors.”¹³ The picture was of a person being driven out of a home or establishment. Fear had no place in the lives of the true believers in Asia Minor. The love of the cross had kicked fear out.

Of course, John’s words were not intended to discount the holy type of fear promoted by God’s Word (Proverbs 1:7 and 2 Corinthians 7:1). Instead, the author meant to address an unhealthy and unholy type of fear. Some of his readers were living in needless insecurity and dread because of the heretics. The scenario was similar to the one Paul addressed in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2:12). While believers are to pursue the fear of God, they are to avoid the fear of man. Calvin rightly made the distinction between “servile” and “filial” fear.¹⁴ True Christians don’t live like slaves, but they do have a healthy fear of God that can be likened to the reverence a child should have for his father (Galatians 4:1-7).

John wanted his readers to know they could overcome the unhealthy type of fear by remembering God’s love for them (John 3:16) and by living according to Christ’s Great Commandment (John 13:34-35). When one is sure of God’s love for them, the interpersonal insecurity that characterizes many human relationships fades away (1 Corinthians 13:7). In addition, the Great Commandment provides God’s people with the confidence that they are living according to the Lord’s law (Matthew 22:40).

The true believers at Asia Minor were strong in Christ. Their standing in Him, along with their growth in love, could give them boldness before both God and others. To live in fear would have been to live contrary of the “confidence” promoted in verse 17. John’s readers possessed the spirit of Proverbs 16:7 — “When a person’s ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.” They also had a right to the boldness of Proverbs

⁸ Robertson, 234.

⁹ Calvin, 246.

¹⁰ Robertson, 235.

¹¹ Akin, 186.

¹² Robertson, 235.

¹³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 598.

¹⁴ Calvin, 247.

28:1 — “The wicked flee when no one is pursuing them, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.” Paul would have agreed with John’s assertion. He taught that believers are to live free of a spirit of fear (Romans 8:15). Believers have both positional (Romans 5:1) and practical (Philippians 4:6-7) peace with God because of their relationship to Christ.

John remarked on the nature of fear by saying, “Because fear involves punishment.” The only other occurrence of the Greek word translated “punishment” appeared within Matthew 25:46. John’s intent was to portray an eschatological retribution at the end of the age.¹⁵ He knew the Gnostics had duped some within the church. Faithful believers were fearing that they might be the subjects of divine punishment at the end of time.

Verse 18 ended with John saying, “So the one who fears is not complete in love.” The idea was that one who was dominated by “servile fear,” as Calvin would call it, was lacking in spiritual maturity, the maturity spoken of in verses 12 and 17. Either such a person had never been saved, or such a person was allowing false doctrine to skew his or her spiritual perspective. The latter scenario was the case with many of John’s readers. They were losing sight of God’s love because of man’s teaching.

One has said, “Fear carries with it a kind of torment that is its own punishment.”¹⁶ Such is certainly the case for those who live without assurance of salvation. Life-dominating anxiety concerning one’s standing before God results in perpetual torture of the soul. John wanted his readers to be liberated from such pain. His words are important for modern believers who often struggle with debilitating doubts. The doctrine of God’s love has a way of erasing all of the natural fear that plagues our hearts and minds because of sin (Genesis 3:7-8). When we know God loves us, and when we have experienced redemption and regeneration through Christ, we are freed from the nagging doubt sin produces.

Verse 19

In verse 19, John spoke of the source of Christian love by saying, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). For John, the love of God was the first principle of Christian love. His perspective was validated by teaching found elsewhere in the New Testament. John 3:16 famously said, “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” God’s love is ground zero of Christian salvation. In John 15:16, Jesus told His disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce fruit and that your fruit should remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you.” Paul told the Romans, “But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). To live in love, one must be gripped by God’s love. The love of the Father is the source from which all true charity flows. Real Christian love is a gospel love. One has said, “The eternal sovereign love of God is the fountain of all that is good in us.”¹⁷

Verse 20

As mentioned earlier, John knew many within the church had a faux form of Christian love (1 John 3:18). They said a lot of the right things, but their lives were devoid of genuine charity. John called such false religious professors out once again in verse 20, saying, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). Elsewhere in his letter, John battled his opponents by quoting their well-known professions of faith (1 John 1:6, 1:8, 1:10, 2:4, 2:6, 2:9). Quite likely, the Gnostics were known for regularly saying “I love God.” John used their words against them. He wanted to prove that their

¹⁵ Ross, 207.

¹⁶ Walvoord and Zuck, ?.

¹⁷ Ross, 207.

religious professions were insincere. Their hateful behavior towards God's people proved that they didn't really love God.

It is important to note the nature of the type of hate John had in mind. The apostle did not mean to speak of the momentary lapses of unloving behavior that may occur in a believer's life from time to time. The word rendered "hates" appeared as a present active subjunctive verb. As a result, it depicted a continual hate, a lifestyle of unloving behavior. John's word could have been translated "keeping on hating."¹⁸

To call someone "a liar" was indeed a tall accusation. A.T. Robertson rightfully acknowledged that John was "blunt and to the point."¹⁹ The apostle did not mince words. He wanted to make real believers aware of the treacherous nature of the teaching that was harming churches. He previously called his opponents "liars" (1 John 1:10, 2:4, 2:22, 5:10). The language may have seemed strong, especially since it came from the famous "apostle of love" (John 21:7). However, John wanted to be frank. The heretics were leading people astray. John had no time for religious niceties and pious pretenses. The Gnostics were erroneous and the church needed to be warned.

It was impossible for the Gnostics to love God as they professed. Lifestyles of hate revealed that they didn't really love God. John said, "the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." The Greek underlying the words "whom he has seen" used perfective verb tenses. John intended to express an abiding reality. The meaning was of one having another "constantly before his eyes."²⁰ The Gnostics were regularly around real believers and they regularly failed to demonstrate real love. Their behavior was a problem. The way they lived was contradictory to the Great Commission (Matthew 22:37-40). If one loved God, he or she would have been driven to love those whom God loved. Love for God would have produced love for others, since "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Verse 20 ended with John once again making reference to the way in which one "cannot" see God. His words were reminiscent of what he said in verse 12. In light of false teachers who made claims of private revelations (Colossians 2:18), John wanted his readers to remember the invisible nature of the Lord. His teaching was in alignment with Paul's words in 1 Timothy 6:16. The invisibility of God apart from self revelation is a fundamental part of God's nature. It is an aspect of His being that makes Him separate from the human realm. It is an attribute associated with His holiness (Isaiah 6:2).

In regard to John's readership, no one could see God. However, love could have made God's nature manifest amongst the churches of Asia Minor. Furthermore, John knew, according to Jesus' teaching in John 20:20, that the most vibrant faith was built on a trust and love toward the unseen God. Those who failed to love those they could see revealed they didn't have genuine faith in the unseen God. One has rightly commented, "Our love for God finds its test of validity in our love for others."²¹

Verse 21

John concluded his discussion on Christian love by saying, "And we have this command from him: The one who loves God must also love his brother and sister" (1 John 4:21). The "this command" to which John referred was none other than the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40 and John 13:34). John made reference to the command earlier in 1 John 2:7-8 and 3:23. His purpose in mentioning it again in verse 21 was simple. He wanted to uphold the importance of love. He had previously used all sorts of arguments to encourage his readers to

¹⁸ Robertson, 235.

¹⁹ Robertson, 236.

²⁰ Ross, 208.

²¹ Beacon, 394.

embrace the virtue. He upheld it as a defining mark of God's character (1 John 4:16), a refuge in the day of judgment (1 John 4:17), the antidote for human fear (1 John 4:18), and the mark of true salvation (1 John 4:19-20). He now appealed to the authority of Christ's teaching. The plain law of Christ was reason enough for believers in Asia Minor to pursue love.

Ultimately, John did not teach from his own accord. His doctrine was built on the authority of Christ. Unlike the Gnostics, he did not follow the theological fads and trends of the day. His belief system wasn't grounded in the fleshly desires of unregenerate humanity. When he taught on love, He shared God's Word concerning the subject.

John's use of the word "command" indicated that love was a matter of Christian duty. Contrary to Gnostic boasts concerning liberty, Christ did indeed intend for His followers to fulfill God's Law. Love was His path for doing so. Yet love was not to be regarded as a fickle, fleeting emotion. It was to be viewed as a conscientious choice to place a high regard on God and others.

All believers had an obligation to live according to God's Moral Law (Exodus 20:1-17). The Lord's Law had not be supplanted by Jesus. Our Lord had said, "Don't think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17). God never intended for His Moral Law to be undone by New Covenant doctrine. In all generations, He has desired for His people to keep His commandments, and love for Him has always been the prerequisite for obeying His commandments (Leviticus 19:18, Deuteronomy 6:4-5, and Matthew 22:37-40).

Verse 21 was meaningful for John's original readers. They could fulfill all of God's Law by obeying the Law of love (Matthew 22:40). John's teaching in verse 21 is meaningful for us as well. Many within twenty-first century Christianity have adopted a lawless form of Christianity that denies the place of any commandment keeping in the Christian life. Out of an overreaction to legalism found in past forms of religion in America, many have adopted a libertine approach to the faith that mirrors the one found amongst the Gnostics in first-century Asia Minor.

The church needs to be awakened to the fact that God's Moral Law still stands. Furthermore, the church needs a renewed conviction that the Lord desires for His people to live according to that Law. The distinction that must be made is in regard to how one fulfills that Law. Christ's pathway to law-keeping is love. When one appropriately loves God and others, one will inadvertently fulfill God's Moral Law toward God (Exodus 21:1-11) and others (Exodus 21:12-17). This was Jesus' meaning when He said, "All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands" (Matthew 22:40).