

GOD'S LOVE & OUR FEARS AT WAR

1 John 4:7-21

August 22, 2021

During this season of COVID, many have lived in fear, and fear and panic has taken its toll. However, we all tend to have fears (believers and unbelievers alike), some are legitimate, and others are illegitimate, but they cause worry and anxiety regardless, affecting our words and our behaviour more than we realize. US President Franklin Roosevelt said this about fear: *"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."* Today more than any time in history, fear has become the primary motivator in many lives. Whether young or old, whether liberal or conservative in our thinking and approach to life, we are easily influenced by our fears and make decisions according to our fears. Today there is a great deal of turmoil in the world which seems to be escalating, the recent earthquake in Haiti, forest fires and severe drought in Canada, the desperate situation in Afghanistan due to the Taliban taking over control of that nation to name a few of the most recent events.

Then, here in Canada we are currently heading for another federal election, a time when people can easily get stirred up and angered over political views, so I believe now is a good time to address this subject of fear. We all recall what happened in the recent US elections, and we don't want to see that happen here in Canada as we go to the polls in September. Since the November 2020 US elections there is still a great deal of fear, anger, and accusations and the US is once again highly divided like they were divided during the civil war, and Canada is also becoming increasingly divided as well. Whenever there are times of turmoil, hardship and uncertainty God's love and our fears are at war. So, let's explore this topic of fear as believers!

Fear works well and has its place to keep us out of danger – but then fear can also keep us away from our calling in serving Christ and keep us away from those God has called us to reach with the Gospel message. We often experience fear in reaching out to those that are different from us, especially those dealing with addictions or mental health issues, and fear also keep us from getting involved in political and social issues like abortion, euthanasia, the LGBTQ+ issues, sex education of our children, and the list is long. And in fact, we sort of like fear in a way, because it keeps us from getting too close to others and getting involved in those highly controversial topics. Fear tells us – I know who to stay away from, I know who my enemies are, I know who I should hate, I know what conversations to avoid, and I know when I can speak about Christ and when to remain silent.

There are numerous reasons why the emotion of fear resonates with us more than love compels us to act Christ-like to others.

When we look at John's first letter to the church, we see how fear is the opposite of love – especially when we look at **1 John 4:18**, *“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”* This verse tells us that love and fear are opposites. They cannot co-exist. They are like oil and water – they don't mix!

Jesus often dealt with the topic of fear when He walked this earth – and that is why so often Jesus asked His disciples and the crowds, *“Why are you so afraid?”* We find that Jesus asked this question of His followers at least forty times throughout the four Gospels. In fact, the phrase *“fear not”* is the most frequently repeated command in the entire Bible, showing up 365 times (once for every day of the year). We especially see how fear takes over the lives of His followers right after Jesus' crucifixion and burial. The disciples end up huddled together in fear in an upper room in Jerusalem, locked behind closed doors. The disciples had put their full hope and trust in Jesus as their Rabbi, their teacher and leader, but now He was gone, and fear has taken center stage in their lives, causing them to retreat into hiding. But after His resurrection, Jesus meets His disciples right in the midst of their fears: Jesus meets two disappointed disciples heading off down the road to Emmaus. Jesus meets grief stricken Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. Jesus meets humiliated Peter over a coal fire on a beach – reassuring all of them that He had risen from the dead and they have nothing to fear because He will never leave them or forsake them now that He is risen from the dead to live forever more!

Whenever life is uncertain, when things start falling apart, when you receive that bad report from the doctor, fear is our first instinct that we all wrestle with and need to work through. In reality we tend to do a lot of things out of fear. Yes, we can easily admit that we're afraid of heights, spiders, snakes, or speaking in public, but to admit those internal fears is much harder, and that's why most of us have difficulty identifying and facing the fears in our lives that keep us from accepting God's unconditional love and loving others as we should. We often don't readily recognize our fears, so don't deal with them as we should, but mask their presence. Fear hides in the shadows of our opinions, our rants, our judgments, and the labels we use to identify others as *“US”* and *“THEM.”* So, when we are suffering, are hurt and feel let down by others around us and lose control over our lives – we start looking for monsters that don't exist, and retreat into hiding in our safe places.

Fear is the enemy of love, and it will put a wedge between us and God, as well as a wedge between us and others, and fear will especially take over and control our emotions. We may want to love generously, we want to give generously, but something keeps pulling us back into that self-protective fear that paralyzes us.

Jesus came into this world to help us deal with our many fears. Jesus came to set us free from our fears and be changed by love, so that we can live in love and be known by love. Listen to this command Jesus gave us in **John 13:35**, *“A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.”* Christ followers are to be known by the unbelievers around them as those who love unconditionally. That is the sign of a true followers of Christ! While we naturally fear and hate our enemies and those who persecute us; Jesus demonstrated by example how to love them. While we want to dislike and hold grudges against those who mistreat and hurt us; Jesus showed us by example how to forgive them. While we want to distance ourselves and stay clear of those not like us; Jesus showed us by example how to share a meal with them and develop friendships with them. Jesus came to reveal and resolve the core problem of humanity – humanity’s tendency towards fear, which is keeping us from being Christ-like and reaching others with the love of Christ!

The problem of fear is that it always turns us inward, while God wants us to always turn outward, being loving and generous. Mankind fears are nothing new, they started way back in a garden. In **Genesis 3**, the voice of doubt and fear slithered into that perfect garden setting and messed with Adam and Eve’s head. **Genesis 3:1-5**, *“Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you may not touch it, or you will die.’ ‘You will not certainly die, the serpent said to the woman. For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”* The serpent put doubt, and the fear of going without into Adam’s and Eve’s minds. God is holding out on you! God doesn’t really love you! God is not always good! And they believed Satan’s lies, and unfortunately many still continue to believe the devil’s lies today!

The voice of Satan, the tempter, the one who comes to steal, kill and destroy introduced fear into the hearts of mankind in that garden, and ever since that day fear continues to nag at us: *“Are you really being loved and cared for? Are you sure you have enough? Are you really secure? Is someone holding out on you? Can you trust God and put your faith in Him when you are going through those difficult times?”* And as a result, fear ends up causing us to doubt God’s provisions and love. Fear constantly messes with our head, causing us to think: *“Maybe I’m not okay. Maybe I’m not loved. Maybe I’m not safe. Maybe I don’t have enough, I will run out. Maybe God won’t heal me or provide for me.”* Shifting us into self-preservation mode and away from God’s calling upon our lives to trust Him with everything and peace in His presence. Fear is the reason Adam and Eve ran and hid from God when He comes walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and why they start a new fashion trend by wearing fig leaves, afraid God may see their nakedness. Because fear has now entered and taken over Adam’s and Eve’s life, they are convinced they must hide, they must protect themselves and cover themselves to be safe, even from God their Creator. As a result, where there once was innocence, trust and harmony, there’s now hostility and jealousy, and ever since that time, we believe if we don’t take care of ourselves and our interests, then no one else will. And this turning inward to self-preservation turns out to be the theme of the entire Bible. So, is there any hope for us in dealing with this problem of fear that paralyzes us and keeps us from trusting God and finding peace in His presence?

That’s what brings us back to John’s first letter to the church which is all about God’s love – **1 John 4** is really the love chapter of the Bible. Most call **1 Corinthians 13** the love chapter, but the word love *“agape”* only appears nine times in **1 Corinthians 13**; however, in **1 John 4**, love and loving *“agape”* appears twenty-seven times. This section of Scripture we’re looking at this morning begins in **verse 7-8** with a call for the church to love one another. Because God’s nature is perfect love, our only source of perfect love comes from God. John makes this bold statement here: *“Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God, but whoever does not love does not know God because God is love.”* So, love is the ultimate test of true faith, if you say you love God and don’t love those around you, even your enemies, then you are a liar, you are not a true born again believer but an imposter and fall under God’s judgment. That’s what we are told in **verse 17**, *“This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment.”* When we love others

unconditionally then we have nothing to fear when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ. On that Judgment Day we will stand before Christ in confidence because we know how to love as God loves! God's love takes away all fear and puts in its place confidence!

Then we come to these wonderful words in **verse 18**, ***“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear had to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”*** All because love and fear are direct opposites, love is the only power that will win the ongoing war against fear. The entire New Testament has a great deal to say about love – in fact the Apostle Paul in **1 Corinthians 13:13** claims that of all the gifts that God gives the church through the Holy Spirit, at the end of the day, all that we have left is only three: ***“faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”*** Love is the greatest source of power available to believers to overcome anything Satan may throw our way. Love will defeat every enemy, especially the enemy of fear, and leave in its place a peace that passes all understanding!

In his letter – John gives us this remarkable insight in **verse 18** that ***“perfect love drives out fear.”*** But what is *“perfect love?”* John describes *“perfect love”* as the love that God shows towards us, while we were still unrepentant sinners and distant from Him. God sent His Son so that whosoever will believe in Him will be saved. So, if you picture this world as a house, it is standing strong and sturdy on the solid foundation called – GOD IS LOVE. That means that God's overflowing love is happening 24/7 to us and to all of those around us. God's love is holding everything together no matter how hard your world is shaking right now. Your house will not collapse sitting on the strong foundation of God's love! Many around us believe that God exists, but sadly, most think God is like those Roman or Greek gods of mythology, sending down lightning bolts of punishment on the world, and as a result, they spend most of their lives trying to avoid His anger and wrath, and go about blaming God for all the disasters we see around us. But that's not the God of the Bible! The God of the Bible is love itself. God is perfect love! That's His nature according to **1 John 3:1**, ***“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.”*** And God wants a family, a big-big family! You and I inherit certain physical traits from our biological parents, and in the same way, when you are a child of God, you inherit the Father's love nature and desire what He desires!

In 1979 Amy Grant sang a song titled, “*My Father’s Eyes.*” She sang, “*I may not be every mother’s dream for her little girl; and my face may not grace the mind of everyone in the world; but that’s all right as long as I can have one wish I pray. When people look at me. I want to hear them say: She’s got her Father’s eyes. Eyes that find the good in things; when good is not around; eyes that find the source of help, when help just can’t be found. Eyes full of compassion, seeing every pain. Knowin’ what you’re going through and feeling it the same.*” When you know Jesus as Lord and Saviour, you will reflect the Father’s love like Jesus reflected His Father’s love when He walked this earth!

By far the most challenging test for a child of God is found in Matthew’s Gospel. When Jesus saw the crowds that were following Him, He went up on a mountainside, sat down and taught them how things work in the Kingdom of God. Jesus began His teaching with the Beatitudes, and then started to expound on subjects such as murder, adultery, divorce, being salt and light, taking oaths, and then speaks on the most challenging test of how we are to love one another, and that’s by loving your enemies. Here’s what Jesus taught in **Matthew 5:43-48**: ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*** Jesus invites us onto the challenging path of love and affection for the most difficult people in our lives and the evillest people around us! How can a Christian love those who hate and persecute them? How can an Afghan Christian love a member of the Taliban that wants to kill him and his family?

To love our enemies for most of us would be comparable to embracing a skunk or a porcupine, not pleasant in any way, leaving us thinking, “*I’ll never do that again!*” Loving people is hard, and loving unlovable people is particularly difficult, but loving our enemies, that’s impossible. However, this is exactly what Jesus was telling His followers to do in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus compares loving our enemies to how God, our heavenly Father loves each person in showing them undeserve mercy and grace according to **Matthew 5:45**, ***“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”*** God doesn’t have favourites, He shows grace and mercy to all,

treating everyone equally, whether they acknowledge Him, and love Him, and follow Him, or curse Him and hate Him. For example: You will notice that non-Christian farmers are blessed with abundant crops, just as the Christian farmers. Thereby God sets the standard for us, showing us how He loves equally those that don't love Him in return!

This was most obvious when Jesus went to the cross, showing mercy to those who were crucifying Him and mocking Him by asking His heavenly Father to forgive them, for they don't realize what they are doing. And this sacrificial act on the cross demonstrated how far the love of God extends to all of humanity, ***“God demonstrated His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”*** (Romans 5:8). God didn't say, *“Okay, clean up your lives and then I'll send Jesus to die for you.”* He sent Jesus to die for us while we were still hopelessly lost and unrepentant sinners. God showed His unconditional love by sending His Son to rescue us from our sinful condition. It was the most important rescue mission throughout all of history, as Jesus said, ***“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”*** (Luke 19:10). The most radical way that Christ has shown us how much He loves every single person, is by willing to go to the cross to win them over. I'm sure that most of us would do whatever we could for those we love deeply, our spouse, a close family member, our kids, but our enemies – that's going to far! And that was Jesus' point in **Matthew 5:46**, ***“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?”*** Jesus calls us to be different from the rest of the world! Most don't have a problem loving those who love them (that's easy), but the radical love Jesus is talking about here, breaks down all barriers and boundaries between *“US”* and *“THEM,”* opening our hearts to all who come along on the path of life – the good, the bad, and the ugly!

Perfect love always means sacrifice and God demonstrated the greatest sacrifice of all time by sending His Son to this earth. We are reminded about this love sacrifice in **1 John 4:9-10**, ***“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*** God's sacrificial love provides the answers to life's greatest questions:

1. Why was I created? To receive and experience God's love.

2. Does God really care about me? God's love is unconditional and filled with grace, wishing all to come to salvation and be part of His everlasting family.
3. Am I free to choose or reject God's love? YES, love must be a choice, must be freely accepted, without coercion or pressure.
4. How can I be saved? Salvation is God's gift of love. Love became a man, Jesus Christ, who dwelt among us and who died as our sacrificial love offering, and by believing in Him and putting our faith and trust in Him, we receive the gift of salvation and eternal life.
5. How can I really know that I'm saved? When we respond to God's loving invitation and then demonstrate that love by loving others as God loves them and accepts them, we have the assurance of salvation. Love is the proof of salvation!
6. How does God help me to love others unconditionally? God offers to every believer the invitation to experience the deepest measures of His love by giving us His Holy Spirit, which gives us the ability and the power to love others. That was Paul's prayer for the Ephesian believers, ***"For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have the power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now in him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for every and every! Amen"*** (Ephesians 3:14-21). God answers all of our questions with LOVE!

Going back to **1 John 4:18** and those powerful words – ***"perfect love drives out fear."*** This description of love is also found in Jesus Sermon on the Mount. Jesus tells us in **Matthew 5:48**, ***"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*** However, it's impossible for us as humans to be perfect like God, so what does the Apostle John and Jesus mean here? What may help us here is if we exchange the word *"perfect"* with the word *"whole."* When we do, we get: *"whole love drives out fear,"* or *"be whole as your heavenly Father is whole."* Whole means that we are not a portion of or slice of something, but we're all in,

we're totally committed to love as Jesus loved. We don't embrace a partial love but the whole aspect of love shown to us in the words and actions of Christ throughout the four Gospels. Not only did Jesus come to this earth to show us God's nature, but He also came to show us how to look at people differently. Since everyone is made in the image of God, everyone has God-like qualities within them, but they're often hidden and out of sight, so we have to dig deep to find them, which involves developing relationships, spending time with others so we can get to know them. So, if we want to see others as Jesus sees them and love them, then we must start seeing them beyond their words and beyond their actions and behaviour and see them as God sees them and as God loves them – faults and all!

That is our obligation as believers according to **verse 19** (NIV), ***“We love because He first loved us.”*** I love the Passion translation, ***“Our love for others is our grateful response to the love God first demonstrated to us”*** – that's the debt of love that we owe that we'll never ever repay! Then in **verse 20**, John offers two contrasting attitudes to prove His point: ***“Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.”*** Hating that person who we see directly before us is a contradiction of our faith! A person can talk about how much they love God, and sing songs like, *“How I love Jesus,”* but if they don't love others, they are lying, they are a phony, all because loving others is a confirmation and demonstration of our faith. Whenever we love those we wouldn't normally love, it's proof positive that we are a child of God. Proof that we have died to self and born anew according to **1 John 3:14**, ***“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death.”*** Love is the proof that we have died to sin and self, having been transformed by the Gospel into a child of God who loves unconditionally!

We are coming into a critical time for the church when we will be tested to the maximum to conform to the ungodly standards of society, and then our fears will be revealed for all to see. Many in the church claim that they love everyone – but in practice they are picking and choosing who will receive their kindness, their compassion and their attention, and who will not. The fact is that we often look at others and put them into two categories: ***“THEM”*** and ***“US,”*** and then that's how we end up treating them. So, here are the questions I want to leave you with: ***“Can you see the image of God in a member of the LGBTQ+ community? Can you see***

the image of God in someone that decides to have an abortion or is an abortion doctor or nurse? Can you see God in someone who doesn't vote like you? Can you see the image of God in your enemy whoever you determine them to be? Can you let go of your fears and love the un-loveable?"

If you want to begin to see others as Jesus sees them, then you need to get past your fears and start seeing the hidden image of God within others. As believers we are called to imitate God like perfection in this world of increasing fear and hate, and that is why Jesus says we need to be known by our love. **John 13:35, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."**

Those around us can only know us in two ways:

1. By our unconditional love, the same generous love as our heavenly Father.
2. By our conditional self-serving love, much like the rest of the secular world, which is no love at all.

There's an old fable which makes a powerful point about the difference between the selfishness of greed and the generosity of love.

"A man had a dream one night and he found himself in Heaven. An angel met him, and the man asked to see the difference between Heaven and Hell. The angel took the man to a door and opened it. The room was filled with large round tables. In the middle of each table was a large pot of stew that smelled so good the visitor's mouth began to water. People were seated around every table, but the visitor noticed that they were all thin and sickly. They appeared to be starving. Then the visitor noticed that each person had a long spoon attached to their hands. The handles of the spoon were three feet long. Each person tried to dip the spoon in the pot to feed themselves, but the spoons were too long for them to bring the stew to their hungry mouths. The visitor shuddered at the sight of such frustration and misery. The angel led him out and said, 'That was hell.'

He led him to another door and opened it. He said, 'And this is Heaven.' At first, the visitor thought it was the same room. There were round tables in the room each with a simmering pot of delicious stew in the middle of the table. But the visitor immediately noticed the difference in the people there. They were each equipped with the identical long spoons, but everyone seemed happy, nourished, and satisfied. They were laughing and talking. The visitor said, 'I don't understand.' The angel said, 'Just watch.' Then the visitor noticed that each person dipped their spoon in the stew and carefully fed the person across the table

from them. The angel said, 'It requires only one skill – sharing. These people have learned to feed each other, while greedy people are miserable because they only think about themselves.'"

All of us will face a future that includes judgment. But you don't have to face it with fear because the war between God's love and our fears has been fought at Calvary and the Bible tells us that God won! So, we have nothing to fear but fear itself, all because God's love is the most powerful force on this earth!

Benediction:

One of the oldest hymns sung by the early Christians, shows how Jesus was able to love His enemies. This hymn is recorded for us in **Philippians 2:1-11**.