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Fear Has To Do With Punishment

1 John 4:18-19

Prayer: *Father, I just again, I thank you for your grace, I thank you for your goodness, I thank you for the fact that we still have a place where we can freely come and worship you knowing that there are brothers and sisters throughout the world who are risking life and limb to do the very same thing. We just pray for grace, we pray for wisdom, we pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit as we open up your book. Lord, give us the ability to make it of permanent value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we've been looking at 1 John and we're in the fourth chapter and last time out we looked at John's survey about love. It started in verse 7 with the simple statement that love itself originates from God himself. And then we moved on to discussing the love of God, the love of people, the love of the Holy Spirit, and finally began to discuss the difference between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness and the power source that each of them runs on. There's the kingdom of light which runs on the power of love and then there's the kingdom of darkness which runs on the

power of power itself. And we spent a good deal of time discussing the differences between these two power sources. We spoke about the apparent calm and peaceful appearance of an aquarium and how it belies the fact that it's a living example of a community that exists by the power of power. I pointed out that as soon as a fish starts indicating any type of weakness, the other fish, they begin to sense that weakness and they begin to gang up and eventually kill that fish. It makes an aquarium an excellent example of how a peaceful looking community could actually be one that's formed on the basis of the power of power instead of love.

Then we expanded the idea of an aquarium to suggest that all of life outside of the gospel, that is life that's based on an evolutionary model, can't help but resemble one huge aquarium with everyone just waiting for signs of weakness to appear. We may not gang up on individuals showing weakness in a physical sense, although that is certainly increasing, but there's no question that figuratively biting and devouring one another depending how strong we might be is the essence of what we now call "cancel culture" and it's become part of a normal every day life-style. We contrasted that evolutionary model with a statement that John makes about love in verse 7. He says: *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*

Evolutionary theory comes exclusively from man and love comes exclusively from God, and both of them expressing themselves in wildly different ways. The evolutionary model tells us that weakness invites chaos and death. The Christian model is of a God who willingly embraces weakness in order to serve even to the point of death on a cross. The Christian model actually posits that weakness is the source of great strength. As Paul put it in *2 Corinthians 12:9*, he said: *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* Well again it suggests that love and power are antithetical, that is the more you have of one, the less you will have of the other. And we learn that growing in Christ likeness means growing in the ability to embrace weakness from the position of strength. And what's unique about embracing the power of love as opposed to the power of power is that someone who genuinely understands the power of love is someone willing to embrace weakness in order to demonstrate love. And Jesus is our primary example in the way he emptied himself of the prerogatives of God, taking on the form of a servant, being willing and obedient even to the point of death on a cross.

And then we asked the question, I mean, how do I respond to power?

How do I respond to weakness? How accomplished am I at taking the form of a servant? How do I react when I'm treated like a servant? Well, this morning we're going to look at a different aspect of what the power of love can do and it centers around two other qualities that happen to be antithetical as well and that is love and fear. And that is the more you have the love, the less you're going to have of fear; the more you have of fear, the less you're going to have of love. Our text this morning is *1 John 4:18-19*. It says: *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.*

So this morning I want to look at three different states of being with regard to fear. First we want to look at the absolute necessity of fear itself, and that is to say in spite of all that the text says negatively about fear, there is a state that is even worse than being fear filled and that's the state of being fearless. It all depends on what is the source of fear and what we do with it.

You know, every year at this time we get stories of tourists who are filtering now back into Yellowstone and each year their warned over and over again that buffalos and grizzly bears are very large and very dangerous animals and they're not to be trifled with. And

every year this advice gets ignored, sometimes with tragic consequences. Just last week a woman approached a bison and she was gored and flipped up into the air resulting in her death. Another person thought it would be neat to have photos taken with a grizzly bear in the background not realizing how fast these animals can charge. Well the point being some creatures are right to be feared. The same applies even more so when we're dealing with our creator. Our text this morning calls for three different reactions to fear. First there is fear called for, then there's fear captured, and finally there's going to be fear conquered. So first let's look at fear called for.

I was just pointing out this morning we live in a remarkable time with regard to fear. I mean, I cannot recall a time in my life when fear has been so palpable and so widespread. We have a fear of inflation, we have a fear of pandemics, we have a fear of food shortages, of skyrocketing gasoline prices, of wars and rumors of wars. Well, normally when a culture enters a time of such uncertainty as this we see people naturally turning to God. I have yet to see that. I mean instead I would have to say there seems to be a collective hardening of hearts. And one of the signs that God points to that marks the beginning of the end is an increase in people that he refers to as scoffers. And you know a scoffer is a different type of unbeliever, he doesn't believe in God but he also

feels compelled to mock and scorn those who do. And God talks specifically about scoffers in scripture. He says -- quote -- *"knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires."* I mean the word scoffer in Greek means a derider. *Jude 1* says: *But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions."*

Maybe it's the Internet, maybe it's social media but it certainly seems like scoffers have come out of the woodwork scoffing. And the primary reason why is because science has answered so many of the questions that were previously attributed to acts of God. I mean we now know how and why hurricanes, tornados and earthquakes occur. We also know how and why diseases are spread, all of which at one time or another were attributable to acts of God, and so the scoffer sees little to no reason to fear a God who in his mind has already been explained away. The funny thing is simply knowing the physical mechanisms by which these events take place in no way grants anyone any ability to prevent or preclude them. In other words they still are acts of God but now they have accompanying insights of physics, biology and chemistry to explain them. For some reason having a scientific explanation of an event seems to remove its fearfulness, and it's those explanations that have given

people a sense that they no longer need to fear God. And by fear God, I don't mean terror, I simply mean respect.

For the vast majority of people God seems out of sight and therefore out of mind. He's no longer thought of as fearful, although God could instantly claim that ability to terrify his people simply by revealing himself. I mean his sheer presence even under the most beneficent of circumstances always provoke nothing but sheer terror. You remember God appearing to the Israelites when he gives the ten commandments, I mean the very mountains shook and there was the sound of a trumpet that grew louder and louder and louder and the people begged Moses make God stop because frankly they were absolutely terrified. *Exodus 20* says: *Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."*

Well that terror at God's presence, eventually it diminished as God's visible presence became less and less and the scoffers among the Jews became more and more vocal until years later they were openly scorning God's provision of manna. They were demanding meat instead of bread. God went from fearful to scorn simply by his

absence. And the same principle applies to us. I mean God's visible presence has been minimal and the scoffers among us have grown bolder and bolder, so much so that this 2,000-year-old comment from Peter seems even more relevant today. This is what Peter said: *Knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."*

Well the scoffers, they insist that all things are continuing just as they have from the beginning, that God's promises are really just empty threats because there's no gods to fear in the first place. And that the fear of God is simply an irrational throwback to primitive times when we didn't understand the science behind everything. Well, God has a few words for those folks who embrace that kind of attitude. He says this in *Proverbs 1:24*, he says: *Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will*

not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD.

See, right off the bat man is faced with this binary decision. It's one that will set him off on two very different pathways depending on how he answers. Either God exists and is worthy of respect and, yes, fear, or he doesn't exist and is worthy of no such thing. And you know God has a name for those who opt for the latter choice, the one that says that God doesn't exist, God calls them fools, and he calls them fools for good reason. From God's perspective all of creation shouts that there's a creator at work. I mean the evidence for his existence is so incredibly overwhelming that God insists that we are surrounded by it. Paul says in *Romans 1: For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*

God says you want proof that I exist? Well how about the ground that you're standing on or the air that you're breathing or the sky that's above you or the birds or the insects or the trees and the flowers and the grass and the ants that are crawling around you on the sidewalk? I mean you and the finest scientists in all the

earth couldn't make a single one of those things if you devoted all of your energy to it, and yet in spite of those overwhelming proofs, you insist that I don't exist? I mean only a fool would say that, says God. And he says that in *Psalm 14*. He says: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."*

God insists if you're going to get anywhere in this world you have to get first things first. You have to get right the most basic understanding of how this world and universe works; and if you can't get it right, if you can't get right God's authorship of the universe then nothing that follows from it is going to be right as well. *Proverbs 1:7* says: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

So fear of the Lord is the only reasonable place to start out in perceiving reality. You see, refusing to fear is one of the preeminent signs of man's inward rebellion towards God because this is not a fear that is rationally arrived at based on the evidence. Rather it's an irrationally decided viewpoint based on man's inherent hatred of having anyone or anything rule over him. In God's eyes this is not simply a misunderstanding, this is an indictable offense. In *Romans 3* God lays out his case against mankind and it reads like an indictment. I mean, there's charge after charge laid at the feet of those who refuse to believe the

evidence for God but then it's all summed up in one final damning charge that encapsulates all of it. Romans 3 says: *As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known."* And then he sums it all up by saying, *"There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

Now at this point I could imagine someone saying, well, wait a minute. You've been telling us for four chapters now about the love of God. You know, 1 John is soaked and it's saturated with the idea of God's love and what it means to express God's love and even our scripture this morning says it unequivocally. It says: *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.* So now you're telling us, by the way, if you don't fear this God, he's going to crush you. So which is it? Is it fear or is it love? Well the answer to that question's going to move us into the next section for this morning. This first one is called fear called for

and I think we can understand if we're ever to understand our proper place in this universe, it's only when we come to grips with the fact that we are creatures of a God beyond comprehension, beyond awe, one who is worthy of the greatest respect and, yes, respect bordering on fear.

C.S. Lewis put it this way in his Narnia Chronicles in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Lucy and Susan are about to meet King Aslan, the lion, who was a figure of Jesus Christ:

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

You see, for some reason our culture has attached goodness to softness. You know, we feminized everything including the Almighty. And the idea that God could be thoroughly good and loving and at the same time thoroughly awesome and terrifying have become unthinkable to our culture. It was perfectly reasonable to

ancient Israel.

You know, a brief survey of the Old Testament response to encountering God is enlightening. We look first at Moses. Moses meets God in the desert and he's naturally terrified. *Exodus 3* says: *And He -- that's God -- said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.* Well Gideon and Jacob, they expected far worse. When Gideon comes face to face with the angel of the Lord who was a pre incarnate expression of the Lord Jesus Christ, he justified assumed he was doomed. He assumed he was going to die because he got that close to God. *Judges 6* it says: *Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the LORD. And Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord GOD! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." But the LORD said to him, "Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die."* Well Jacob met God at a place called Peniel and he was astounded that he came out of that meeting alive. It says: *So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."* Then we have Moses and Aaron along with Aaron's son and the seventy elders of Israel, they see God and they're astounded that he did not lay a hand on them. *Exodus 24* says: *Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There*

was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.

And then we get to Samson's parents. They meet up with the angel of the Lord and once again in their mind they're doomed. It says this in *Judges 13*. It says: *The angel of the LORD appeared no more to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the LORD. And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." And then Manoah's wife comforts him by saying, good news, hey, guess what, God didn't kill us! He didn't kill us outright so I think we're okay. It says: But his wife said to him, "If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these."*

I mean do you think it's possible these folks might have had a different understanding of who God was than we do? I mean far better to be fearful and encouraged than to be fearless and crushed. But as John in his letter speaks to us this morning, fear may be a place to visit briefly as we comprehend the enormity of who our God is but it's really no place to stay. And again our

scripture says: *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.* You know, there's only one perfect love, and that's the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. And part of our fear of God stems from the fact that the gospel tells us that every one of us is doomed because every one of us has failed to live up to God's law. Our creator laid out that law in God's ten commandments. I mean that was the standard, and by that standard, all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. You see, God's standard is, was and will always be absolute perfection. So if you've ever lied, you failed the standard. If you've ever stolen even a paper clip, you failed the standard. If you've ever had a lustful thought or coveted anything in addition to the other six commandments, you failed the standard. That's why God says: *As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one."*

You see, God's perfection was also God's dilemma and it could only be solved by the cross. The love that John speaks of as perfect is the love of God in heaven becoming a human being and actually living out the same kind of lives that we live out with all of the temptations and all of the stresses and all of the struggles that we humans have with the exception of the fact that he did it flawlessly. Never a lie, never a theft, never a lustful thought or a coveted anything was the life lived by Jesus Christ. He met the

standard perfectly so that he could then offer his life as a substitute for your life and my life before God the Father, God the Spirit and his own standard of justice. Perfect love saw that we could never meet his perfect standard so he met that standard for us, taking the just punishment that was due all failures to meet the standard. And thus God could say, I condemn you but then God the rescuer can say I will take your condemnation upon myself. The cross was God's public display of that very process. As *Romans 3* says: *It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

So John tells us in our text this morning: *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.* So should you fear a God who's capable of inflicting eternal punishment on those who reject his offer of salvation? What does Jesus himself say? He says: *"I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: Fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!"* Some folks misunderstand Jesus to be saying fear the devil, but that's not what he's saying at all. He is saying fear God. Fear the perfect standard that God's justice must judge all of us

by. Of course if you don't know God, the chances are you don't fear him at all. It's only when God's Holy Spirit opens up your eyes and gives you the gift of regeneration that the pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place. God loved us with a perfect love and the reason why that love drives fear away is clear from our text this morning: Fear has to do with punishment, and God knows all about that fear and all about that punishment because he exercised it and he absorbed it. And what John is saying is that God's perfect love met that standard and paid that price for all of his sheep not just partially, not just halfway but all the way, one hundred percent. If you are in Christ there is no longer any thought of punishment because punishment has already been exacted, not on you and me but on him. Our fear which is such a necessary component of understanding who God is has now been captured and it's been captured by the one who took our sins upon himself along with the punishment it so richly deserved.

And finally as believers we move from fear called for through fear captured to fear conquered, and the whole idea is captured perfectly as someone has pointed out by John Newton's Amazing Grace. Listen to what Newton said, he said: "It was grace that taught my heart to fear." It was God's grace alone that takes us from the ranks of the scoffers who have no fear whatsoever of God and brings us into the kingdom where we begin the process of

growing our knowledge and understanding of the majesty and awe of God. And as Newton put it, "It was grace that taught my heart to fear," that's grace called for. "And grace my fears relieved." Well the very same grace that opened my eyes to who God was, that grace didn't leave me at the point of fear and terror, but it showed me the God who loved me enough to take all thoughts of fear and punishment upon himself so that we could be free of that fear. "How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed." I mean that hour marked my transition from fear called for through fear captured into fear conquered, a process that for us takes an entire lifetime to work through. Again John says: *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.*

Now there are two types of fear that John might be referring to here. One is the fear of punishment which still lingers even after we come to know Christ as Savior. Depending on your background, you may have a very difficult time casting off the notion that your salvation has been bought and paid for one hundred percent and you truly are free in Christ. Perhaps you think that God may have paid for most of my sin but there's this sin or that sin that just kind of lingers as unforgivable, unpayable. Well, you know, it's important to focus on exactly what God said when he said our sins were forgiven. He said in *1 John 1:9: If we confess our sins, he*

is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. So not only is God faithful about forgiving our sins but he's just as well and that means for us to refuse to accept God's forgiveness is for us to question God's justice and therefore Christ's death on the cross. I mean the blood of Christ may have been enough to forgive this sin or that sin but it's just coming up short in forgiving my sin. For that I need something far more powerful than the blood of Christ. For that, I need my own effort, I need my own guilt, I need my own conscience accusing me. You see how insulting that is to God? God says my Son poured out his perfect blood on the cross to pay the price of your sin and you say that's not enough?

Well the other fear is to know that you truly are lacking in love and thus having not been perfected in love you wonder if this verse or the whole of John's letter even applies to you. Perhaps you remember all too well what John said just a few verses back, he says: *Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.* And John's answer to those struggling to love is to point them straight to the cross and what Christ did for us there. He says: *In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* You see, if you still fear because you know that the love of Christ

has not been perfected in you, understand the kind of love that God is talking about here. He's talking about unconditional love. It's love extended to someone who does absolutely nothing in any way, shape, manner or form to deserve it. I know folks who have told me repeatedly that they struggle with the fact that they don't like people in general, and some have said and I don't like in particular some of the people in this church. Well, my answer to that dilemma is to point out that Christ never asked you to like people in general or to like people in this church, he said you are to love them. And until you understand the difference between liking and loving, you will never be perfected in love. You see, liking is rooted in how we were react to one another emotionally. Loving is how we decide either to obey Christ or not. Loving's not what you feel; it's what you do. And it's a fact that you can love your way into feeling by doing a lot quicker and a lot more easily than you'll ever feel your way to loving by emoting. It's all a matter of deciding whom you're going to obey, the command of Christ or the dictates of your own emotional state.

You see, it matters not one bit how you feel emotionally when you decide to act lovingly. The Good Samaritan might have been repulsed to the point of nausea when he decided to love someone beaten unconscious lying by the side of the road. His feelings, his feelings counted for nothing. John has given us example after

example of Christ doing the very same thing, loving us when he too had no reason whatsoever to even like us. And what's exceptional about the love of Christ is what John says in the very next verse. He says: *We love because he first loved us.* You know, if Jesus ever decided to wait for us to become loveable before loving us, he'd be waiting still today because it's never going to happen. He took the initiative. *But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* But God shows and Christ commands us to show that same love for others while they too are still sinners.

Now if you're brutally honest you might be thinking at this point, well, why should I? Why should I love those I consider to be at best unloveable? What's my motivation? Well, aside from it being a direct command of your Lord and Savior, how about being able to rid yourself of fear? Again, let me go back to what John said. He said: *For fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.* And being perfected in love means completing what Christ started in you the moment you gave your life to him. It's all part of that process that we call sanctification, this idea of growing our love is directly related to decreasing our fear. You see, the more you practice obedience by loving the unlovely, the more certain you grow that Christ is perfecting that love within you. Let's say you've been dieting and you step on the

scale and you see that you've lost ten pounds, well you know that the diet is working. Well the same is true with the love of Christ when you see someone or hear of someone that you previously couldn't stand and when you find that your response to that person is now different, that you're actually finding ways of serving that person or at least understanding where they're coming from that you know that something else is at work. It's not a diet. It's the Holy Spirit perfecting you in love, and that's why we don't fear. That's why we don't fear like the world fears.

See, fear does indeed have to do with punishment and there's a basic fear that accompanies every one of us who are outside the love of Christ. It's this hidden dreaded silence that tells us that one day judgment is coming. Most people have been quite successful in pushing that fear down to the point of non-existence but it's still there nonetheless. And that's why I say the first component we need in the process of growing in Christ likeness is fear called for. It's understanding exactly who God is and who we are, who Christ is and who we are in relation to him. And coming fully into that relationship brings us to the place where we understand just who it was who took that punishment that the rest of the world sits in silent dread waiting for. Only believers in Christ know the extent to which Christ absorbed that punishment, and that's fear captured by Christ. And finally as we grow in our

ability to love those who are unloving and unloveable, we become more and more aware that God is literally perfecting the love of Christ in us.

And so the next time you share a good word or undertake a good deed or act kindly in any way towards someone you might have utterly dismissed previously, you remember where you've come from and where you're going, and in spite of the fact that you recognize that you still have light years to go, you'll sense the power of Christ perfecting that love within you and you'll know that Christ is alive and well and that his spirit is within you. That's the sign of fear conquered. It starts with grace and it ends by with grace and again as John Newton put it, "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved, how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed." Let's pray.

Father, I praise you and thank you for you are. I praise you and thank you for the fact that we need fear nothing. Lord, as we see the love of Christ perfected in us perfecting in us, I pray that we would grow more and more able to resist the fear that so plagues this world. I pray that you would give us the ability to see and to know and to understand that love and give us that ability not only to understand it but to project it and to give others the hope that it represents. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.