

Perfect Love and Judgment

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1John 4:18 "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love."

How and why exactly does perfect love cast out fear? What is this fear a fear of? What does it mean to be made perfect in love? Broadly, I maintain that John is talking about how Christian maturity (sanctification) is the key to ameliorating or eliminating altogether any anxiety a Christian might have regarding his accountability before his Savior at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Here are some bullet point thoughts of why I maintain that this is the teaching of 1 John 4:18.

1. Some maintain that John is talking here about the fact that our justification is the basis of our fear being cast out.
 - a. Their argument
 - i. Perfect love is the love that God has for us in sending Christ to die for our sins and pay the penalty for sin on our behalf. (1 John 4:10)
 - ii. Because a believer in Christ has the righteousness of God imputed to him (Rom. 4:4-5; 2 Cor. 5:21) he will not come into judgment. (John 5:24)
 - iii. Since he will not come into judgment, the Christian need not fear condemnation in the day of judgment.
 - b. My response
 - i. I certainly agree that the above argument is true in every respect.
 - ii. However, I will argue that this is not the point of 1 John 4:18.
2. Arguments for my view
 - a. I maintain that the theme of 1 John is sanctification and not justification.
 - i. There are at least two main view of how to understand the theme 1 John: the "tests for life" view (justification) and the "tests for fellowship" view (sanctification).¹
 - (1) The "tests for life" view says that, primarily, John is teaching his readers how they can be assured that they have eternal life.
 - (2) The "test for fellowship" view says that, primarily, John is teaching his readers (who he is confident have eternal life) how they can know whether they are in

¹ For a helpful look at the strengths and weakness of each view, see Gary W. Derickson, "What Is the Message of 1 John?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (January-March): 89-105.

fellowship with God and, further, how they can know whether they have developed or are developing a deeper and more intimate relationship with God.

- ii. Some who hold the "tests for life" view mistakenly take 1 John 5:13 as the purpose of the epistle as a whole.
 - (1) The verse reads: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God."
 - (2) The argument is that John wrote his letter to instruct his readers how to know whether they have eternal life.
 - (3) Theologically, this amounts to saying that the theme of 1 John is justification rather than sanctification.
 - (4) Since the theme is justification (according to this view), the interpretation of first resort for any given verse is to take it as a reference to justification rather than sanctification.
 - (a) This view does not insist that *every* verse has to be interpreted as a justification verse.
 - (b) It is possible, according to this view, to acknowledge that some verses indeed are references to sanctification.
- iii. Instead, it would seem that 1 John 5:13 is stating the purpose of the immediate context instead of the purpose of the entire epistle.
 - (1) John states several "purposes" for his writing in 1:4; 2:1; and 2:26.
 - (2) There is no reason to take the last "purpose" as the purpose of the whole epistle.
- b. Since I maintain that John is primarily writing to believers regarding their sanctification, my interpretation of first resort is to take 1 John 4:18 as a reference to something regarding the Christian's sanctification.
 - i. As a sanctification issue, the idea of "perfection" or of being "perfect" has to do with maturity in the faith.
 - ii. The notion of "perfection" or being "perfect" is included within the lexical domain of τέλος and its cognates.

- (1) See William Bauer's discussion of τέλος in his Greek lexicon.² (Also see the Bauer lexical reference to τελέω in note 3.)
 - (2) Examples of τέλος and its cognates referring to maturity include: 2 Cor. 7:1; Gal. 3:3; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:12; Col. 1:28; Heb. 6:1; James 1:4; 2:22.
- c. John is referencing the event of the believer appearing before the Judgment Seat of Christ, a.k.a., the "Bema" seat. (Βῆματος)
- i. Earlier, John references the event of the believer's encounter with Christ at Christ's coming (2:28).
 - ii. This is the same event that Paul teaches about in 2 Cor. 5:1-21. (cf. 1 Cor. 3:12-15 and Rom. 14:10)
 - iii. There are several parallels to note between John and Paul here.
 - (1) Paul admonishes us to be well pleasing to Him. (2 Cor. 5:9)
John admonishes us to abide in Him. (2:28)
 - (2) Paul references the "terror" (φόβον, genitive of φόβος) of the Lord. (2 Cor. 5:11)
John references the "fear" (φόβος). (4:18)
 - (3) Paul tells us that the Spirit is a guarantee. (2 Cor. 5:5)
John tells us that we know we abide in God and God in us by the Spirit He has given us of. (4:13)
 - (4) Paul tells of possible reward and warns of possible loss. (1 Cor. 3:14-15)
John tells of the possibility of being confident at Christ's coming or being ashamed. (2:28)
 - (5) Paul grounds his point about our coming judgment before Christ as believers (a judgment of our sanctification at the Βῆματος, 2 Cor. 5:10) in the truth of God's imputed righteousness to the believer based on the work of Christ on the cross (i.e., our justification, 2 Cor. 5:19, 21).
John grounds his point about our casting out fear and having boldness in the day of judgment (4:17) in the truth of God's sending His one and only Son into the world to be the propitiation for our sins (i.e., our justification, 4:9-10).

3. Arguments against my view

- a. In the preceding context (4:10), John is clearly referencing justification, not sanctification.

² William Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v., τέλος, p. 811-812.

b. Response

- i. Since I have granted to the proponent of the "tests for life" view the prerogative of allowing some verses to be references to sanctification, as a proponent of the "tests for fellowship" view, I take the prerogative of allowing some verses to be references to justification (as I do for 4:10).
- ii. However, I maintain that John's argument for the possibility of, the obligation for, and the motivation for our sanctification is predicated on the reality of our having been justified.
- iii. Thus, John reminds his readers that the propitiation that Christ provided (4:10) is a basis a motivation for (as well the very foundation of) our commitment to Him which can lead to our sanctification.
- iv. This is what John references in the following verse (4:11).

c. John references our having boldness in the "day of judgment" (4:17).

- i. However, this expression seems everywhere else in the Bible to refer, not to the Judgment Seat of Christ, but rather, to the judgment between the saved and the lost. (Mt. 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36; Mark 6:11; 2 Pet. 2:9; 3:7)
- ii. Therefore, it seems more reasonable that John is telling believers that there is no need for fear in the day of judgment (between the saved and the lost) since, if you are a believer in Christ, you will not be so judged.

iii. Response

- (1) I certainly agree that, because of our having the righteousness of God imputed to us by faith (Rom. 4:4-5), we need not fear eternal condemnation in the judgment of God.
 - (2) However, I reject the notion the phrase "day of judgment" in 1 John necessarily refers to the judgment between the saved and the lost just because it is used this way elsewhere in the Scriptures.
 - (a) Paul references the believers' appearing before Christ as a judgment. (2 Cor. 5:10)
 - (b) Further, Paul describes this same event "the day." (1 Cor. 3:13)
 - (c) Thus, it seem plausible that John could refer to this event as a "day of judgment."
- d. John says "in this love has been perfected among us" (ἐν τούτῳ τετελείωται ἡ ἀγάπη μεθ' ἡμῶν).

- i. The form of the verb τετελείωται (3rd person singular, perfect passive indicative of τελέω, "I bring to an end," "I finish," "I complete [something]"³) would indicate that the perfection has already been completed.
- ii. However, this surely would not necessarily be the case for John's readers if the perfection was a reference to their sanctification.
- iii. Response
 - (1) John seems to say that the love is perfected in us in as much as we love one another. (4:12b)
 - (2) But it would seem that loving one another is not automatic just because we are justified, otherwise, John would not need to say we "ought" love one another. (4:11)

4. Summary

- a. In his letter, John is encouraging his readers to live up to the reality of their justification by loving one another.
- b. Loving one another develops maturity within us as believers in as much as loving one another facilitates our abiding in God.
- c. Such maturity is more than merely being justified.
- d. Further, such maturity is the key to eliminating fear and attaining boldness at the coming of the Savior before Whom we will appear to be judged as believers.

³ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v., τελέω, p. 810.