



REAL: AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY IN A WORLD OF COUNTERFEITS

Perfected Love: The Sign of Signs

1 John 4:7-11

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⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Introduction

Jesus Christ was crystal clear about the difference between real and not-real. Christians can often be rather muddied in their thinking about the difference. Jesus certainly wasn't. The telltale difference is *fruit*. "Thus you will recognize them by their fruits," Jesus says.

Of course, fruit doesn't lie. Pears don't come from apple trees, or plums from peach trees. Yet this is Jesus' point about *people*. "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree

bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush” (Luke 6:43-44).

The authors of the New Testament were likewise clear about the difference between real and not-real. Perhaps no author stated the difference more starkly than the Apostle John, the Beloved Disciple and author of the Gospel of John, as well as this letter. Here’s a sampling:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth (1:5-6).

Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him (2:4-5).

Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil (3:7-8).

In our own passage, John captures the essence of what he’s saying with a simple phrase, one that marks the telltale difference between those who are real Christians, and those who aren’t. He puts his finger, you might say, on the sign of signs, or the mark of marks. It’s John’s way of talking about fruit in the Christian life. And it’s the phrase: *perfected love*. “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is *perfected* in us” (v. 12). Or, a few verses later, we read:

By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. 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 (1 John 4:17-18).

Perfected love is the clearest, most reliable way to know whether you’re real. It is the surest evidence of being real. It is the mark of marks, the sign of signs, the distinguishing quality in the life of any real Christian. Perfected love is the hallmark of authentic Christianity.

It is the sign of sign because every other sign or mark of real Christianity is an expression of love. And every other sign or mark enables love. Furthermore, every grace in the soul of the believer is intended to bring about love. In fact, everything God does in your life is intended to bring love to fuller expression in your life.

What Is Perfected Love?

Perfected love is *visible* love. It’s love that’s *gone public*. It’s love not as a hidden feeling, but a public fact. It’s love that’s made itself known in the world; it’s become visible.

Perfected love is also *tangible* love. It's not only something you can see, but it's also something you can touch. It's also, therefore, *practical* love, the kind of love that meets real practical needs.

And, because it's tangible and practical, it's also *sacrificial* love. It's the kind of love that's costly; it costs you to express perfected love.

John challenges real Christians to this of visible, tangible, practical, sacrificial love, what he calls perfected love: "Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (3:18). Perfected love is love, not in word or talk, but in deed and in truth.

On June 2, 1939, the young German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, set sail for New York. This was his second visit to the United States. His plan was to stay for at least a year. But things had taken a turn for the worse in his own country, and no sooner did he arrive on the shores here than he began feeling a strong inner prompting to return to Germany, in order to identify with his own countrymen in their struggle against the Third Reich. Shortly after his arrival, he wrote a letter to a friend back in Germany, confessing how he felt and what his plans were:

I have had time to think and to pray about my situation and that of my nation and to have God's will for me clarified. I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany.

So, having only been in the States for a month, Bonhoeffer boarded a ship and made the return trip to Germany. One historian describes the decision:

The image of Bonhoeffer boarding ship, voluntarily preparing to sail back—straight into the hell that Germany had become, into resistance, into the great likelihood of his own death—is an unforgettable scene and a poignant moment in the history of the Church in the twentieth century.

Or in the words of the famous British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, "Had he stayed, America might have gained a theologian, but the world would have lost a Christian martyr."¹ Indeed, we would have lost out on a powerful and lasting picture of perfected love: love gone public and made visible, tangible, practical and sacrificial.

God's Love Is Perfected Love

God's love is perfected love. Of course, "God is love," as John reminds us. Here we are reminded that God is a community of persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is therefore never alone, but always and forever enjoys relationship within himself, between the three

¹ *A Third Testament*, p. 180.

persons of the Godhead. And the relationship the three persons of the Trinity enjoy is a relationship of love. It's always been that way. It will always be that way.

But this perfect Trinitarian love became *perfected* love when God went public with his love. "In this the love of God *was made manifest among us*, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him" (v. 9).

You might say that God perfected his love by sending his Son into the world. Not that God's love was anything less than perfect. But by sending his Son into the world, God went public with his love. His perfect love became perfected love in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus—his life, death, resurrection—God's love became visible, tangible, practical and, of course, sacrificial. This is the wonderful point John makes in the opening of this letter:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3).

Perfected love is the person of Jesus Christ. For there, in the person of Christ, we see God's love for the world made manifest, gone public. "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us" (3:16).

Perfected Love Comes From God

So we need to understand that God's love is perfected love. But we also must realize that perfected love comes from God. John is very clear on this point: "love is from God" (v. 7).

The real love of real Christians isn't something they come up with on their own. Anyone who knows real love would be the first to tell you that. Real, perfected love comes not from below, but from above. It's source is in God, and God alone.

God is the one who *initiates* love. "We love because he first loved us" (v. 19). "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" (v. 10).

He is also the one who has *defined* love. Not because he's given us a dictionary definition, but because he's shown us what it looks like in his Son. He's given us a pattern to follow—and his name is Jesus Christ.

But God also *empowers* this perfected love. And he does so through the presence of his Holy Spirit. Perfected love comes from the Spirit. "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" (v. 13). The Spirit is the source of perfected love. For the Spirit is, quite literally, the love the Father and Son share for one another.

But if love is from God, how do you get this love in your life? Perfected love comes from God and is received by faith. While you're not the source of this love, you are nevertheless

responsible to open your arms to embrace this love and abide in this love. First, you must be born of God (v. 7).

But how is a person born of God? They must come to know God. And how do you come to know God? You come to know him by receiving what he has revealed of himself—by faith embracing who he has shown himself to be. And where has he revealed himself? Most clearly, in the gospel.

What is the gospel? It is the good news that God has done something spectacular: he has sent his own Son Jesus Christ into the world to save people from their sins.

Cultivating Perfected Love

Having come to share in God’s perfected love, how do you cultivate it in your life?

Of course, you must begin by receiving the love of God into your heart and soul. If you don’t even have the beginnings of perfected love in your life, you won’t have the working of perfected love. God must shed his love abroad in your heart through the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:5).

But Scripture encourages us that we can cultivate perfected love—or turn unperfected love into perfected love—by doing several things.

The Greatest of These is Love

First, we can prioritize perfected love. There are many excellent things we should pursue and do in the Christian life: deeper spiritual experience, risk-taking acts of faith, greater and greater understanding of biblical truth. But above them all, standing tall and unchallenged, is love. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “So now faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

We must prioritize the greatest of these: love. As one of the great preachers of the twentieth-century has rightly said: “The hallmark of the saints is their great, increasing concern about the element of love in their lives.”²

Oswald Chambers, whose devotional classic, *My Utmost for His Highest*, is known and read by many, had a delicious way of describing what it means to prioritize love. In his words, you so prioritize your relationship with Christ and abiding in his love that you become “carefully careless about everything else in comparison to that.”³

Often what hinders love from reaching its goal in our lives is the fear of insecurity; we know that perfected love can push us into awkward spots and messy situations. You give more than you can really afford. You involve yourself in a person’s life in a way that goes beyond your comfort-zone. You take on a responsibility for the good of others at significant cost to yourself or perhaps your family.

² Studies in 1 John (volume 4), p. 172.

³ My Utmost for His Highest, p. 142 (selection for May 21).

When you prioritize and pursue perfected love, it can lead you into places where you feel vulnerable and exposed; situations where you're forced to cast yourself on the grace of God for help.

Abide In Me

Second, we can protect perfected love. You see, here's the thing: it's possible to lose your first love. Jesus says that's what happened to the otherwise admirable church in Ephesus. They were good on most every other front: doctrinally faithful, spiritually discerning, staying strong even through hard times. "But," Jesus says, "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first" (Rev. 2:4).

You see, our love for Christ and for others can slip; it can grow cold. It doesn't happen intentionally. It's like losing a piece of luggage at the airport. And so we must protect ourselves for perfected love. We do this by guarding our heart and being careful about what it is that we love. Earlier in John's first epistle, he cautions: "Do not love the world or the things in the world" (2:15). He knows if you share your love with the things of the world, you may lose it over time. In his short epistle, Jude similarly challenges believers: "keep yourselves in the love of God" (v. 21).

Jesus spoke of the absolute necessity of *abiding in him* as the key to protecting and persevering in perfected love. He says you and I—we're nothing more than branches. We can't do much of anything on our own. "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).

Consider How to Stir Up

Third, we need the help of others to promote perfected love in our life. The Book of Hebrews encourages us: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works" (10:24). This verse calls us to think carefully about how we can help promote perfected love in each other's lives. Literally, the verse reads: "And let us consider one another, to stir up to love and good works." It's a call for getting to know one another—each other's personality, experiences, gifts, passions, dreams—so that we can know how to cheer for each other in the pursuit of perfected love.

I think of the graciousness of God in surrounding me with others who know and love me, and seek to promote perfected love in my own life. First, my wife. She knows me, and she knows how to gently prod and gracefully affirm me, in a way that helps stir up perfected love in my life. Or I think of my ministry colleagues and the elders, who so often do the same. Or my dear friends, in this congregation, and all over the country, who pray for me, challenge me, inspire and encourage me in the path of discipleship and the way of love.

Cultivating perfected love in your life isn't a one-man job. It's a team effort. We all need others in our lives to help promote perfected love.

More Love to Thee!

Fourth, we can pray for perfected love. It's tempting to assume we shoulder the responsibility for perfected love ourselves. While living a life of love is certainly something we do, we must also realize that perfected love is ultimately *a gift from God*—something he gives in increasing measure as you ask him for it. Earnest prayer for perfected love must be, then, our regular practice. We see in his letters the Apostle Paul routinely pray for believers to grow in their love for Christ and one another. "And it is my prayer," he says to the Philippians, "that your love may abound more and more" (1:9). Or for the believers in Thessalonica, he prays this: "may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all" (1 Thess. 3:12).

But perhaps the most powerful of Paul's prayers for perfected love can be found in Ephesians 3. When I was a freshman at Wheaton College, God visited the campus in a uniquely powerful way; some referred to it as a revival. Students gathered for a week straight, eight to ten hours at a time, to worship God and confess sin. During that time the chaplain of the college challenged us all to meditate on and indeed memorize this glorious prayer, that we might grow in love.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:14-19).

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the twentieth centuries great preachers, made this observation: "The servants of God who have most adorned the life and the history of the Christian Church have always been men [and women] who have realized that this is the most important thing of all, and they have spent hours in prayer seeking His face and enjoying His love."⁴

A godly woman named Elizabeth Prentiss was suffering from a serious illness. During her time of convalescence, she wrote for herself a prayer to Christ for more and more love for him. She kept the prayer to herself for many years. But eventually she showed it to her husband, over a decade later, and he encouraged her to have it published. Thankfully, she did, because it's the text to that wonderful hymn, "More Love To Thee, O Christ":

More love to Thee, O Christ, more love to Thee!
Hear Thou the prayer I make on bended knee.
This is my earnest plea: More love, O Christ, to Thee;
More love to Thee, more love to Thee!

⁴ Cited in Strauch, *Love or Die*, p. 35.

If we're serious about seeing perfected love blossom fully in our own lives, then we ought to pray like this: *More love to Thee, more love to Thee!*

Conclusion

One of my dear friends, a pastor in North Carolina. He said friends of theirs just returned from China with a little girl they'd adopted. But what gripped them was an orphanage full of little boys and girls wearing bibs that say: "Mommy loves me," or "Daddy loves me."

What each one of those children is waiting for is perfected love: love not in word or talk, but in deed and in truth; a love that's gone public, that's become visible and tangible and practical and sacrificial.

That kind of love is what this needy world waits for as well: perfected love. That's the kind of love the Father has shown us in sending his own Son into the world to die for our sins. And that's the kind of love that ought to mark our lives as followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the perfect picture of perfected love. He is the embodiment of it. You may recall the time when Jesus celebrated his last meal with his disciples, on the eve of his betrayal. In his gospel, John says something most interesting: "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (*eis telos*)" (John 13:1). What I think John is trying to tell us is not so much that Jesus continued to love his disciples to the very end, but that he made his love for them very concrete and visible.

What we see is perfected love. And what did he do? He knelt down at each one of their feet, and washed them. That's visible, concrete, practical, humble, sacrificial love. That's perfected love. That's the love of God, and the love of the Son of God. And that's the kind of love we are to have for one another: to wash one another's feet.

As I think about this congregation and the call to perfected love, I'm confident Paul's words to the Thessalonian believers are true for you as well.

Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more (1 Thess. 4:9-10).

Amen.