

*Love that Drives out Fear*

**1 John 4:7-21**

John Breon

At the beginning of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, Charlie Brown is not feeling the Christmas spirit. He's blue, he's down because he hasn't received any Christmas cards. His little sister is just interested in getting money for Christmas. His dog, Snoopy, has entered a lights and display contest, hoping to win the big prize.

So Charlie Brown goes to see Lucy, the neighborhood psychiatrist. For five cents, she'll diagnose his problem. Lucy starts listing various fears that Charlie Brown might have. "Are you afraid of responsibility? If you are, then you have hypengyophobia." He doesn't think that's it. "How about cats? If you're afraid of cats, you have ailurophasia."

"Well, sort of, but I'm not sure."

By the way, I read that Napoleon had a fear of cats.

Lucy goes on. "Are you afraid of staircases? If you are, then you have climacaphobia. Maybe you have thalassophobia. This is fear of the ocean. Or gephyrophobia, which is the fear of crossing bridges. Or maybe you have pantophobia. Do you think you have pantophobia?"

"What's pantophobia?" he asks.

"The fear of everything!"

"THAT'S IT!" he shouts. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/phobias-lucy-charlie-brown-christmas/pantophobia>)

So what are you afraid of? You may not have been diagnosed with a clinical phobia, an irrational fear. And we're not talking about healthy fear—the fear that keeps you from touching a hot stove or that keeps you driving on the right side of a yellow line on the highway. But what fear gnaws at you, fills you with dread, terrorizes you?

Is it the fear that the past will catch up with you? Or the fear that right now you don't have what it takes to cope and to live the life God intends for you? Maybe it's fear of the unknown future.

John addresses all of these aspects of life in this passage. He says there's no fear in love, but that perfect love casts out fear. He's mainly

talking about fear of being punished by God at the day of judgment. But if we're living in God's love, we don't have to fear that punishment. The God who has loved us loves us now and will love us forever. We respond by loving God through loving each other. That's how we abide in God and God's love.

The past doesn't have to threaten us anymore. We love because God first loved us. God is love. Now, we don't turn that around and say that love is God. Love is not God. But God is love and the Lord defines love and is the source of love. God has shown us his love by sending his one and only Son into the world. God sent his Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. The death of Jesus for us covers and cleanses and roots out our sin.

In giving his Son, God gives himself to us and for us. God's love is always before our love. God takes the initiative. We see this love best in Jesus laying down his life for us.

Our worth, our value, our significance come from God. Our value isn't rooted in self-esteem, just in ourselves. Our value is discovered in grace. It's rooted in the greatness and graciousness of God.

Eddie Fox, a United Methodist evangelist, tells about being in the South Pacific kingdom of Tonga in 1977 to speak at a Methodist youth convention. He had the opportunity to meet the king of Tonga. The king asked where Eddie was from. He told him he was from Nashville. The king got out an atlas and Eddie showed him where Nashville is. Maps used to be printed on paper. A bunch of them bound together were called an atlas. Then the king wanted to know where Plains, GA was. Plains was the home of Jimmy Carter who was president of the U.S. then. Plains wasn't on the map, but Eddie found where it would be and with his pen made a dot on the king's map.

My dot and your dot are on the king's map, not in Tonga, but on the map of the Sovereign ruler of all life. To have our dot on the Lord's map means that we are known, loved and valued. We are somebody.  
(*Grace Esteem* iv-vi)

Our past doesn't have to define who we are. It's doesn't have to control us. Our past is covered by God's grace. The death of Jesus has dealt with our sins. They can't catch up with us. They are covered, rooted out, cleansed.

This frees us to live in the present with confidence. We know, right now that we live in God. We abide in God and God abides in us. We know this because God has given us his Spirit. God sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice. God sends his Spirit as his abiding presence. The Holy Spirit is God in the now, Jesus in the present tense. The Spirit enables us to know and receive God's love and truth. The Spirit inspires us to live in love and truth.

In the present, right now, we're called to love one another. This is the present sign that God lives in us. Loving each other shows the fullness of God's love. No one has seen God, but God is visible when his children love one another. This is real love in the real world. What's that look like? How do we live that love?

We see people as people, not as things. One definition of love is "giving of yourself for the good of others, even for those with whom you have differences"

([www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2011/may/deeplove.html](http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2011/may/deeplove.html)).

How are you doing on praying for a difficult person in your life? Are you still asking God to bless and help them, to show them love and kindness? Is your attitude toward that person starting to change?

Loving each other means listening. It's so easy to get caught up in what we're interested in and not pay attention to the people around us. Sometimes Nancy will be telling me something and I'm reading and I don't know what she's been saying. I have to put down the book or the iPad and give her my attention. Reuben Welch, in a book written several years ago, puts it this way:

Love says, I'll put the paper down, I'll turn the knob off, [today, we'd add, I'll set the phone aside], I will look and I will listen and all of me is present here to listen and to look at you. ...All of me is here, at attention, to care and to will your good. (*We Really Do Need Each Other* 109, 110)

Loving one another also means letting go, releasing, not judging. We've talked about trying to raise our kids to be independent and think for themselves—and then they are and they do!

Love has to be freely given. We love but we don't control or dominate. Again, Reuben Welch says it well:

Every once in a while, I need to engage in a little mental exercise that puts my family up on a large pedestal.... I need to walk around the pedestal and look them over, one by one, and say, "I love you. I release you. I am responsible to you and for you—but I do not own you. I will not force you to find your fulfillment in my fulfillment—but I'll let you go to be your own person and find your own fulfillment supported by my love and care." How easy it is to write about this exercise and how hard to do it. (113)

We try to love that way and God helps us. But also, knowing we're loved like that sets us free and gives us confidence to live. I read about an American couple who adopted an older child from a horrific orphanage in another country. When they brought her home one of the things they told her was that she was expected to clean her room every day. When she heard about that responsibility, she fixated on it and saw it as a way she would earn her family's love. She isolated that responsibility and applied it to her frame of thinking that was shaped by life in the orphanage. So, every morning when her parents came in her room, it was immaculate and she would sit on the bed and say, "My room is clean. Can I stay? Do you still love me?" Her words broke her new parents' hearts. Eventually, the girl learned to hear what her parents said as their unconditionally beloved child who would never be forsaken; she was not a visitor trying to earn her place in the family.

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2018/september/fearful-adopted-child-finds-unconditional-love.html>

When we know God loves us, we have confidence that our past sins and failures and wounds won't catch up with us and control us. We're free

to live in confidence now. And we have a source of confidence that flows to us from the future. We have confidence or boldness for the day of judgment, because perfect love drives out fear. As we mature in love, fear is progressively driven out. If we live in fear of God's judgment, we haven't yet trusted that "whoever believes in God's Son is not condemned." And whoever hears Jesus' word and believes him who sent Jesus has eternal life and won't be condemned. That person has passed from death to life (John 3:18; 5:24).

Earlier in this letter we read:

This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commands us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us. (1 John 3:19-24)

And toward the end of the letter, we find this word of assurance:

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son of God has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. (5:11-13)

The more we trust in what Christ has done for us and is doing in us, the more confidence we have to face the future. One writer comments on this:

The basis of our openness [or confidence] ... is the faithfulness and love of God. ...the openness is possible because the love I received was discovered at the moment of my deepest need and vulnerability; therefore once I know I am loved when I am empty-handed, this sets me free from the depressive self-doubt about my future acceptability. ...The Christ I met on the road as my redeemer is the Christ I meet in judgment as my Lord. (Earl Palmer, *The Communicator's Commentary*, 1, 2, 3 John, Revelation)

Michael Card sings about this reality:

To be so completely guilty, given over to despair  
To look into your Judge's face and see a Savior there  
(*Jubilee*, on albums *The Beginning* and *The Ancient Faith*)

The novel and the musical *Les Miserables* tell the story of a man named Jean Valjean. It's a story of crime and guilt and sin and revenge and grace and love and redemption. At the end of his journey, as Valjean is about to die, he hears the voices of people he's known, singing from heaven. One of the things they sing to him is this line: "To love another person is to see the face of God."

I used to have some trouble with that. I wanted to defend the purity of God's love. I didn't want God's love to be misunderstood or cheapened. God's love is defined by Jesus. We see God and God's love most clearly in Jesus, especially on the cross. But I've come to see that wherever there is genuine love, God is there. God's love is at least peeking through the love we experience in our relationships. And often, that's the beginning, it's opening the door a crack to God's wonderful love that covers our past, that gives us confidence for the future, God's love that is right here and right now.