1 John 4 – The test of love

1. Introduction

a. Throughout this book John outlines three tests that help us to be sure of the authenticity of our faith. There is the doctrinal test of believing the truth about Jesus, and we looked at one element of that test last time when we learned how to test the spirits. Second is the moral test of obedience to God's commands.

   i This week we will concentrate on the third test, the social test of love for others. John has a lot to say on the subject of love. Where we will get to this morning is how becoming perfected in love has two consequences: it casts out fear, and it enables us to face judgment with confidence.

b. Love is an emotive word that means many different things and has many different expressions. The problem with "love" in the English language is that it has to fit in to so many different contexts and variations, sometimes it is difficult to know exactly what is meant by it; often the only clue we have is the context in which it is used.

c. We have difficulty distinguishing between sentimental love on the one hand, and the practical kind of love on the other, and everything in between. We have become so familiar with the word that we can easily gloss over it and consign it to just a concept or emotion that has become devalued because of the generic way it is used in the world.

d. When it comes to the New Testament there is a way we can be more specific about what we mean by love, because in the Greek language there were 4 different words that are used to describe different aspects and meanings of the English word love.

   i **Eros** – this is the romantic, intimate, often sexual kind of love that is the most common expression of love used by the world. Most pop songs are based on this kind of love.

   ii **Storge** – this is the word used for the kind of empathetic love between parents and children, or for the bond of love between an owner and his dog for example.

   iii **Phileo** – one of the more commonly used words in the New Testament, used to indicate friendship, fondness, affection, delight and personal attachment. It is often described as brotherly love.

   iv **Agape** – this is the word the bible uses to describe the kind of unconditional love that God has for us. It is the highest ideal of love, the purest kind of love that incorporates both the intimate affection element but at the same time the covenantal commitment element of love. (Eg. 1 Corinthians 13)

   v When John speaks of love in this book, he almost exclusively uses the word **agape** to describe the kind of love he is talking about.

e. Love in the bible can be directed to both people and things. Towards things, love means enjoying or taking pleasure in these things. Love towards other people is more complex. As with things, loving other people may mean enjoying them and taking pleasure in their personalities, rejoicing in their achievements etc. But from a biblical perspective, there is also the aspect of love for

those who are not attractive or productive, who don't fit into our social preferences. In this case love is a deep commitment to helping them to become all that God wants them to be.

i Love isn't just a warm, fuzzy feeling, biblical love is not based on our feelings. Our love for others must stem from a recognition that God loved us when we were at our most unlovely. God didn't wait for us to become acceptable before he lavished his love on us – he made a deliberate choice to love us. Biblical love will cross the boundaries of worldly love and reach out to bring a measure of God's love into the lives of others.

ii Sometimes that means we have to crucify our own preferences and desires for the sake of a greater love both for God and for other people. 1 Corinthians 13 love is tough, but it's biblical.

2. God is love

1 John 4:7–11 *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. [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.*

a. John reminds us that we must love one another because love comes from God. One of the main evidences we have that we have been born again of the Spirit of God, and that we know God, is the outworking of love in our lives.

i The principle and most prominent way that this love is displayed is by our love for our brothers and sisters that make up the community of God's people. After our love for God, that is our first priority, the household of God. From there our love then reaches out to the rest of the world.

b. Here John begins to introduce us to the test of love: "anyone who doesn't show love in their lives doesn't know God, because God is love." So everything God does is motivated by love. Sometimes it doesn't look like love according to our definition of love, but it always is.

i A baby given at Christmas; then scourged and crucified at Passover. Did that look like love? This was the greatest act of love, the greatest rescue plan ever conceived; the dream of a father who loved without measure, made reality by a son whose love for his father was without measure.

ii God has chosen to manifest his love to a fallen world through his one and only son, Jesus. He is the key, it is by knowing him, receiving him, loving him that we not only receive eternal life, but we also have a new dimension to this life that we live now.

iii John spells it out – in ***this*** is love… that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sin. John's conclusion is this – if God loved us like that, then we should reciprocate in the way we love one another.

1 John 4:12–16 *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 Saviour 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.

c. John says we can be assured that God abides in us, and we abide in God, if we see the Holy Spirit producing in us both love for one another and our confession of truth that Jesus is the Son of God.

d. He continues to apply his test of love, relating it to how we abide in God, because that is a good indicator of where we are in the Christian life. He starts by saying that no-one has ever seen God. The question he is addressing is: how can you be sure of a relationship with a God you can't see? John's answer is that the love that we have for one another is a sure indicator of the very presence of God in us.

e. It's the presence of the Holy Spirit working in us that enables us to love in the way that God intends, working in and through you to manifest the love of God. He doesn't just manufacture love out of nowhere – he grows it as a fruit in our lives. We bear the fruit of love as we abide in God and allow the Holy Spirit to grow it in us.

f. The evidence of whether you abide in God and God in you is how you respond to John's testimony that the Father has sent the Son. If you respond with agreement, then God abides in you. The centrality of Jesus in all of this is so important. The degree to which we are able to love others is predicated upon the degree with which we love Jesus.

g. John concludes, saying we have come to know and believe the love God has for us, talking about knowledge that is gained by experience, not by the accumulation of facts. Abiding in God's love produces two spiritual benefits – we grow in knowledge and we grow in faith.

    i Summary of this section: There is an aroma about God that can't be concealed, the aroma of love. When he comes into your life, the aroma comes into your life, and is the sign of God's saving presence; if you smell it, you know he is there. You have assurance.

h. John is well aware that in the practicality of loving one another it's easy to be a hypocrite. So he hits this vital matter of practical love for one another head-on. He links love that comes from God with confidence in the day of judgment, and the expression of that love with obedience to God.

3. Confidence before God

1 John 4:17–18 *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.*

a. The first question you need to answer is how confident are you to stand before Jesus on the day of judgment? The bible is very clear on this subject: there is coming a day when there will be a reckoning, and every individual person will have to give an account for their life as they stand before Jesus.

    i From beginning to end the bible speaks of a coming day of judgment for all mankind. Death itself, which is common to all mankind, is a judgment for our sin, but it is not the final judgment.

Hebrews 9:27 *…it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment…*

Romans 14:10–12 *Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; [11] for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." [12] So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

Acts 17:30–31 *The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, [31] because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."*

b. The judgment of God is one of the most neglected and misunderstood subjects in the church today. Some people say that the Old Testament is about God's judgment, but the New Testament is about God's grace. But if you take the time to study it you will find God's grace in the Old Testament; and likewise there is much about judgment in the New Testament.

    i God has not changed – He is a God of grace, but he is also a God of judgment. And both stem from his heart of love. Love is just as much at the heart of God's judgment as it is at the heart of his love. They are just two different expressions of his love.

c. We must take the day of judgment as seriously as John does. He wants us to be confident before God and not paralysed by fear of judgment. John is seeking to produce a generation of Christians who are utterly confident that God will accept them on the day of judgment.

d. Although John is talking about a specific day of judgment in these verses, there is a further application. As well as the day when each individual will stand before the Lord, there is also a season of judgment at the end of the age when the Lord judges the Antichrist and the nations, a season of 7 years that we often refer to as the End Times, covering the period leading up to Jesus' second coming and defeat of Satan.

    i We can have confidence in both scenarios. We can have confidence when we stand before the Lord because the wrath of God over our own sin has been borne by Jesus at Calvary, so we are confident because our judgment is not for wrath, but for reward.

John 5:24 *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*

    ii Equally we can have confidence if we are still alive in the season of God's judgment at the end of the age that we are protected from the wrath of God that is poured out in judgment. That wrath is reserved for the Antichrist and those who belong to him.

Revelation 9:4 *They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.*

e. John wants us to be confident in our trust in God, so that we can approach the day of judgment without fear. No one who is willing to follow John's teaching needs to be fearful at the approach of death. None of us will have to approach the judgment seat of God with our fingers crossed, wondering if we are going to make it.

4. Perfect love casts out fear

a. How do we get this confidence that John says should be ours? It is the result of abiding in God's love and having God's love perfected in us, and that perfected love shows us that we are like

Jesus. What is perfected love? Perfected love refers to God's love in us coming to completion or bearing fruit as we love each other. Perfected love is the love of God expressing itself in our love for one another.

i It is important that we understand this, as many people misunderstand the word "perfected." Most people equate perfection with being changed from flawed imperfection into a state of flawless perfection. But the Greek word that John uses doesn't mean that, rather it generally means finished, or completed, or accomplished.

ii We should understand verse 17 this way: "In this – that is, in your love for each other – God's love is put into action and so reaches its appointed goal." It's not an imperfect expression of love in just words or talk, but fully expressed and outworked in practical action.

b. The consequence of having love perfected in us is that we have confidence in the day of judgment. Not because we are sinlessly perfect in the way we love. It shows us that we have become like Jesus, we have the Spirit of Jesus at work in us, and it shows that we belong to the family of God.

c. On the importance of loving one another, Martin Lloyd Jones has this to say: *"Not to be concerned about loving the brethren, not to be concerned as to whether I am dwelling in love or not, is to misunderstand the whole purpose of my salvation, and therefore it is to flout God's love. If this is not the greatest concern of my life, then I am a mere beginner in the Christian life. At the beginning, of course, we have a very great concern about forgiveness; we are very concerned about certain particular sins which may have been evident in our lives before our conversion. But we must not stop at that. The hallmark of the saints is their great, increasing concern about the element of love in their lives."*

d. Verse 18is often misused, misquoted and misunderstood so I want to make sure we understand what it is saying, and equally what it is not saying.

1 John 4:18 *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.*

i Does that sound familiar? But many people when quoting this verse add a word that is not there in the original text. They add the word "all" before fear – "perfect love casts out all fear." That is not what this verse says, it is not referring here to fear in general, so this verse is not saying that all and any fear you may have can be cancelled out by having perfect love.

ii And there is a further problem with this text. In the Greek text for this passage there is a word in the original that doesn't appear in most of today's bible translations. There is a definite article that adds a shade of meaning to what John is saying that most translations appear to miss. In this verse, the word fear is qualified by the definite article, so it should read "perfect love casts out the fear" – or it could also be "this fear."

iii What is the fear in this verse? It's the fear of rejection by God on the day of judgment. John is contrasting the confidence of acceptance in verse 17 with the fear of rejection in this verse. So realistically speaking he is simply re-stating verse 17 but in a negative way.

e. What happens to that fear when it is confronted by perfected love? Most translations say it is "cast out." It is a much more explosive action than that – thrust out would be better; think in

terms of an ejector seat. The Greek word is the root of our word "ballistic" descriptive of a missile being fired. That's the power behind perfected love.

f. John is saying that you can't draw near to God in love and run away from him out of fear of judgment at the same time. The two are incompatible.

1 John 4:19 *We love because he first loved us.*

g. John wants to leave us in no doubt as to the source of our love. His point is that if we love God or others with genuine biblical love, we need to remember that such love did not originate with us. It came from God, who loved us while we were yet sinners. It is evidence that we have experienced His love in a saving way.

   i Our acts of love towards others never cause God's love to be initiated towards us, it's always the reverse. We cannot love others in order to gain more of God's love. God is always the initiator when it comes to love.

h. This simple verse goes down right into the depths of the heart of God. He didn't have to love us, it was a choice. Love has been defined by God and anything that doesn't fit that definition is not love. It is the well-spring that causes our own hearts to beat in time with God's heart, and it is from that river of love that every small act of self-sacrificial love stems.

   i True love is a costly commodity, but that we have a source of supply that never runs dry. So you can be as extravagant and generous as you like in giving away love, because you have a guaranteed, limitless supply available. God's love is always available 24/7 on-demand.

i. There is a practical outworking of this verse for us to consider. If you are struggling to love someone, maybe someone who has wronged you, then meditate on God's love as it was shown to you at the cross. You did not deserve it in any way; you deserved His wrath and judgment. But in spite of all of your sins, Jesus willingly suffered the penalty that you should have received. Now He wants you to be the channel for His love to others.

5. Conclusion

a. Our primary source of confidence is that we have trusted in Jesus and His shed blood as the propitiation for our sins. It is His blood that atones for sins. How do we know that our faith in Christ is genuine, since it is easy to be deceived? One evidence of genuine faith is when we see God's love flowing through us to others, especially to others that we would not naturally love. The more you see God's love surfacing in your life, the more you will "have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming."

b. So we're to love one another with this perfected kind of love, this sacrificial, selfless love. And we're to love one another because love is of God and God lives in us. That's the test of love.