

"We believe God is Love, but do we live in God's Love?"

Kallam Grove Christian Pulpit

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Text: John 21:15-17; I John 4:7-16

If you look at the history of Christianity or just remember the sermons you have heard, the motive for urging people to become a Christian or to be a better Christian has one of three warnings: "**you ought, you should, and you must.**" Each of them is laden with guilt. Furthermore, sermons have often been accented with your need to fear God.

Fear permeates life in our times. Many politicians, most of the economists, all the environmentalists, and preachers who warn that these are the last days before the end of time all have one thing in common--FEAR. The motive of evangelism has not so much been that God loves you **but that you owe it to God to do your duty** to the church and obey the rules of morality and ethics. Far too often the message has been that to be a Christian you are to "Behave, keep your nose clean, and escape hell." Someone has said that many preachers sell fire insurance. Repent and you will receive a "Get out of hell free" card, like the "Get out of jail free" card in Monopoly. **How sad that the most compelling argument for following Jesus Christ is a threat rather than a promise.**

To me, the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, theologically, is what President Franklin D. Roosevelt said politically to a frightened American people in 1933: "**The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.**" The essence of the Christian gospel is not threat and fear but standing on the promise that God loves us, warts and all.

St. Cecile Cathedral

In the famous St. Cecile cathedral in southern France, a great artist in the 14th century lay on his back for years painting the entire ceiling with his image of scenes from the Bible. Most people were illiterate so that they came from miles around to learn the Gospel from that mural on the ceiling. On the ceiling, at the back of the church is the artist's conception of the morning of creation in the Garden of Eden. All along vast length of the cathedral ceiling are various biblical scenes, each with a message in art. At the front of the church, the mural **wrapped** from the ceiling down the wall, a vertical mural. It is the backdrop of the high altar; it captures your attention as you enter and you cannot escape it all during the service. This scene is his depiction of the Last Judgment. It is 40 feet tall and 30 feet wide. God is sitting on a throne and beneath him are a herd of goats and a flock of sheep. The goats are burning in hell--which is seven panels representing the seven deadly sins defined by the medieval church. One panel depicts the goats that are guilty of the deadly sin of **greed**. Their feet are tied and one demon is holding up their heads and opening their mouths while another demon is pouring hot molten gold down their throats as God's punishment if we are greedy. Imagine worshipping with that constant threat that if you have earthly wealth, you will have eternal punishment.

That is just one of hundreds of paintings, stained glass windows, sculptures, and sermons that all have the same theme: "**God is good, we are bad and we will be punished. Jehovah will get**

you if you don't watch out." It is the same theology of the familiar Christmas song we still sing to children:

*You better watch out, you better not pout, you better not cry; I'm telling you why.
Santa Claus is coming to town.
He knows when you are sleeping; he knows when you're awake;
he knows when you've been good or bad; so be good for goodness sake.*

All the preacher has to do is to substitute the word "Jesus" for "Santa Claus" and we are convinced that we **better watch out**. God plays the game of "gotcha." God is portrayed as a judge who sees everything and never forgets anything, and terrible things will happen to those who do not do what God says. Really, is that what Jesus said?

So, is my message to you is--"watch out"? What about John 3:16--"For God so loved that God made the supreme sacrifice--he gave us His only son that we might have eternal life! Don't stop with verse 16! Verse 17 says, "God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved." Jesus said in Luke 12:32, *Fear not little flock, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.* Jesus went so far as to say, *The kingdom of God is within you.* If you have not internalized that, you are more than you have yet become. **We are God's children, which is predicated not on our behavior but on our belonging, not on what we do but on who we are.** Think about your relationship with your children. Do you love them less when they misbehave or make a big mistake? God has the same relationship we parents and grandparents have with our children. His love endures.

Love Relationships with Limits

Part of our problem is that many of our love relationships have limits. The reality is that we fall in love and fall out of love. We speak of "ex husbands" and "ex wives." We refer to some people as one who "used to be my friend." We say of some people, "They used to be in our church." When I hear that term, I know there is a sad story behind it.

We live under the tyranny of the "favor line." What is the "favor line"? It is that invisible line that tells us that if we meet someone's expectations enough we will merit and receive their favor. In every child's mind, we think the parents have a favor line, so we did things to get them to brag on us, to favor us. Friendship has a favor line. There is an old saying: "You have to be a friend to have one." Our job certainly has a favor line! Meet the expectations and you might be favored with a promotion or a raise; fail to meet expectations and you might not even have a job! So if our whole life in this world is filled with the tyranny of the favor line, it is only natural to assume that God has a favor line too. Be good and get his favor; be bad and get his punishment or his neglect.

Many people have told me that their fear of falling out of God's favor or their fear of eternal hell is the only reason they come to church, keep their marriage vows, tithe, or in Johnny Cash's words, "walk the line." They cling to their religion of fear like holding on to a shard of driftwood in a raging sea. How sad. What about the love of God as revealed through Jesus? Is it the tyranny of the favor line or a "love that will not let us go."

Peter and Jesus (John 21)

Peter was the lead man in Jesus' twelve disciples was high tempered and a slow learner. We are shocked to read how he caved on the night of the crucifixion when the girl asked, "Aren't you a Galilean? Your accent is Galilean. Did you know Him?" As we remember, Peter said, "No, you have me all wrong. I do not know him." Simon, whom Jesus renamed "Rock" (*petros* in Latin is "rock."), had left his lucrative fishing business and walked and talked and slept under the stars with Jesus, heard his parables, and seen his miracles. How could he have the unmitigated gall to deny his Master three times! He never saw Jesus again until his Lord's death.

Then, after the resurrection, when Peter had returned to his fishing in the Sea of Galilee, Jesus appeared and fix breakfast by the sea. What do you think Simon Peter expected when he saw Jesus for the first time after is denial? I mean, he was so embarrassed. In his mind the tape was running. He could hear himself saying, "I don't know the Galilean."

Then he heard Jesus' voice. **Jesus was greeting him with these words, "Peter, do you love me?"** What we read about in the 21st chapter of John's Gospel is a verbal dance. Jesus keeps asking, "Do you love me?" Peter keeps saying, "yes" and Jesus keeps saying, "Then take care of my sheep." But our English versions don't unveil irony of the verbal dance. In Greek Jesus is asking, "Do you love me as I love you--without limits or reference to your sin of denial?" Jesus was not dwelling on Peter's sin of denial; he was asking if Peter is ready to "suit up" as a soldier in the Christian army. While Peter is saying, "I love you like a brother. I love you with limits," **Peter is using a word that means affection, mutual memories, buddies.** When Jesus is asking, "Do you love me?" **Jesus is using a word that means love without limits.** This is the kernel of the gospel.

God's Love without Limits

God's love for us has no limits, but do we believe that? However, that is not our playbook. We still tend to prefer fearing God than internalizing God's love for us, with all our warts. It is difficult to give up our fear of God's punishment, It is hard not to teach our children that God is a judge who demands obedience and hands out sentences of justice.

A powerful testament of faith overcoming fear is shown in Bart Millard's story, the lead singer of MercyMe. Early in his life, he faced a tumultuous relationship with his abusive father, who his mother had to leave, leaving him filled with fear and pain. Despite this, Bart's faith in God provided him the strength to forgive so that he could heal. Before his father died, he became a devoted Christian and Bart saw the miraculous power of redemption. Bart's unwavering faith inspired him to write his song, I Can Only Imagine. This song became a fan favorite propelling it into the Top 40, and the band to national fame. In 2002 it won Song of the Year and Millard won Songwriter of the Year. His faith over fear moved him to write the 4th greatest song in Christian music.

Bart Millard discovered what I pray God will grant me and grant you—**when we come to know that God's love will not let us go, will not abandon us in our time of trial, and is unconditional.** God's love is not based on what we do but on who we are! And who are we?

We are children of God. In St. Paul's words, "...if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." (Romans 8:17) In Jesus we see a love modeled that we cannot find anywhere else and he told us that "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father for the Father and I are one." (John 14:9, 10:30) No matter how low we are, God's everlasting arms of love are beneath us. No matter what we have done, God's love forgives us. That is why we sing "amazing" grace! Do you believe that? **That is the bottom line of the Gospel.**

God's name and God's nature is love. **Love--not fear, not guilt, and not punishment-- is the core of God's nature.** Love is more powerful than our sin, our failures, our mistakes, our disappointments, our nightmares, our doubts, and our deepest fears." As St. Paul put it "love bears all things, believes all things, endures all things, hopes all things."

When John was so old that he could call adults "children," he wrote, "**Fear has to do with punishment. God's love has replaced the old order of fear.**" Yes, God inspired the Jews to write, "*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*" (Proverbs 9:10) Yes, certainly for the Jews, that was the beginning of wisdom, and obedience to the Ten Commandments is the measuring stick for a clean moral life, **but obedience is not the end product of spiritual wisdom! We always fall short!** As one of my grandsons says, "Pop, I messed up." My response is, "Son we all have messed up." Only love will look past your failures, past the times we disappointed people, past your track record, and greet you with open arms, a hug, and words of welcome and love. The bottom line of John 3:16 is that **God so loved the world that he became like us so we can become like him.**

It is true that we are not wired to understand love like God is or love in the measure God has for us. But God gave his son to show us that **He needed to look after us.** Remember the gospel song,

"He cares, he cares, oh I know God cares. His heart is touched with my grief.
Though the days are weary and the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares."

But is not love risky? What if we receive love but do not respond with response-ability? Love is co-operant; it needs a cooperative response. True. **God loves us with the risk that we might not love him.** We have this option with God just as we do in human relationships. Nevertheless, God is love! **The Bible says, "We love because he first loved us."** Jesus did not die to satisfy God's demand for justice. His sacrifice was not that God needed to smell blood like the Jews thought when they burned an unblemished lamb. No! **The Cross is the doorway for sinners into the father's mansion.** The light is on and the banner says, "Welcome home." We are all prodigal sons and daughters and Jesus is tenderly watching and waiting and calling, "O sinner, you are my child. Come home."

Jesus said in Luke 15 "*There is more rejoicing in heaven over one who was lost and is found than over a 1000 who are safely in the fold.*" Now I must pop the question with eternal dimensions. Are you leaning on God's everlasting arms? Do you feel God's love? If not, are you ready to come home and get your hug, and your party? Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me, I hold on and not let go." (*The Message* by Eugene Peterson) Amen