

PERFECT LOVES CASTS OUT FEAR
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

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I John 4:7-21

In his famous novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, author George Orwell tells the story of Winston Smith, who lives in the mythical country of Oceania. The nation has been taken over by a totalitarian government that seeks to control the thoughts and actions of its citizens. The poster that is seen everywhere is: Big Brother Is Watching You.

But Winston and his girlfriend Julia are determined to resist the thought police. They are successful until Winston and Julia are arrested. The authorities are determined to change his attitude. Winston is taken to a small room and strapped to a chair. The interrogator produces a wire cage containing large, hungry brown rats. The cage is diabolically constructed with two compartments. In one compartment are the rats. The other compartment is lowered over Winston's head. All the interrogator has to do is to raise the partition between the two compartments, and the rats will be free to attack Winston's face. Here is how Orwell describes what happens:

The mask was closing on his face. The wire brushed his cheek. And then . . . he understood that in the whole world there was one person that he could thrust between himself and the rats. And he was shouting frantically, over and over: "Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her. Not me! Julia! Not me!"

The interrogator had heard what he wanted. He had broken Winston's spirit. He had turned this man against the one person he loved. And he undid the wire cage and removed it from Winston's head.

Later, Winston and Julia are together, but they know things can never be the same again. "I betrayed you," she said baldly. "I betrayed you," he said. "You try to pretend afterwards that it was only a trick and you didn't mean it," she said. "But at the time when it happens you do mean it. You think there's no other way of saving

yourself, and you're ready to save yourself that way. You *want* it to happen to the other person. You don't care what they suffer. All you care about is yourself."¹

We might say that Orwell's novel illustrates the principle: Perfect fear casts out love. If you are completely filled with fear, love goes out the window. The First Letter of John says just the opposite: Perfect love casts out fear. Love over here; fear over there. And most of us are somewhere in the middle. We want to be those who love, and to some extent we do that. But we also live in a world that produces fear. It may not eliminate our love, but fear waters it down.

How much of life is driven by fear. After 9/11, one government official counseled us to "Be afraid, be very afraid." And too often we have taken that advice to heart. How to we show our fear? We submit to searches at airports and ballparks because we are scared of terrorists. We call for fences at the border because we're scared of the influx of immigrants. We check our children's Halloween candy because we're scared of all the loonies we are told are out there. We watch our diets and get checkups from the doctor because we are scared of falling into poor health. We get home security systems to ward off intruders. We guard our investment portfolio because we're scared of not having enough. "Be afraid; be very afraid." And we are.

The way we respond to fear, of course, is to pretend that we're not afraid. "Don't let 'em see you scared. Don't flinch." We live that way whether it is on the athletic field or the battlefield, in the board room or the school room. "I'm tough. I'm not scared."

There is even a line of clothing known as No Fear. They have a line of T-shirts² which express that tough-guy attitude. Let's line up the sayings on those T-shirts against some of the words from First John:

The No Fear T-shirt says: "Take no prisoners, show no mercy, intimidate the enemy."

First John says: "Beloved, let us love one another.

The T-shirt says: "Know your limits, then break them."

First John says: "Everyone who loves is born of God."

The T-shirt says: "Second place is the first loser."

¹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949). pp. 289, 294.

² On their website—www.NoFear.com.

First John says: “Perfect love gives us boldness for the day of judgment.”

The T-shirt says: “I hate weak people.”

First John says you can’t say you love God if you hate brother or sister.

Two very different ways of responding to the fear in our world: The world says: Be tough. The Word says: Love one another. You cannot do both simultaneously. Perfect fear casts out love, as Winston Smith discovered. But perfect love casts out fear. Martin Luther King puts it this way: “Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear: only love can do that.”³

Perfect love casts out fear. To be sure, my love is far from perfect, and you know yours is hardly perfect, either. In fact, this love is not something that I whip up inside myself at all. The source of love is God. It is God’s love living in us that gives us the power to resist fear.

You want to resist fear? Consider this: God is for you. You want boldness? Then this: “Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God.” You want courage? Take heart: “If God is for us, who can be against us.”

So, fear not. Fear not. It is the most often repeated command in the Bible. To scared shepherds on the hillside on the night of Jesus’ birth: Fear not. To disciples in a storm at sea: Fear not. To trembling women who came to the tomb on the first day of the week: Fear not—he is not here, he is risen. To us in all our timidity and anxiety and uncertainty: Fear not.

If I can believe that, if I can hold to it as God holds onto me, then I am free, not to be tough—Fear This!—but to love. “If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.” I can dare to reach out to the very one I used to fear, and include even that one as a brother or sister.

Fear divides. Fear says: You *or* me. This town ain’t big enough for both of us. One of us has got to go.

Love says: You *and* me. I draw a circle not to keep you out, but to draw you in.

³ Martin Luther King, “The Antidotes for Fear.” *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* James M. Washington, editor. (San Francisco: Harper and Row 1986), p. 514.

In 1955, teenager Emmett Till traveled from his home in Chicago to visit family members near Greenwood, Mississippi. One day he went into a store with friends. The female clerk accused Emmett of flirting with her. Late that night men went to Emmett's house, dragged him out of bed, beat and killed him, and threw his body into the river. It was one of the events that galvanized a nation in what became the civil rights movement.

Many years later, Emmett's mother was interviewed about what had happened, and her feelings toward the men who had killed her son. She said,

The natural thing would be to hate them, yet I'd have to say I'm unnatural. I did not wish them dead. I did not wish them in jail. If I had to, I could take their children as if they were my own and I could have loved them. I believe the Lord meant what he said, and I try to live by the way I've been taught.⁴

That is an almost unbelievable statement, pretty close to a perfect love that casts out fear. I'm pretty sure I couldn't say something like that if someone took the life of my child. But, like you, I'm working to understand these words in First John and put them in my life.

I think of the group that is preparing to go back to south Mississippi to help with hurricane cleanup. That's not exactly the safest thing to be doing. There are biohazards. There are rusty nails and all the rest. There is some reason to be afraid. But perfect love casts out fear. This group goes to show their love for others in need. "We love because he first loved us."

I can almost hear the objections that some of you are thinking to all this. "You think love is going to solve all the problems? There are some genuinely evil people out there—what about them?" I know. I've got the same questions you do. It sounds so impractical—replacing the fear of this world with love. But the scriptures seem to believe it, and Jesus gave his life because of that love.

Perhaps, then, in the battle in our souls between fear and love, we are willing to give it a try to move just a little toward the love side. Besides, when you consider our world, look at the fix that fear has gotten us into. †

⁴ *The New Interpreter's Bible* Volume XII, p. 434.