

Chris Murphy

March 15th, 2026

1 John 4: 13-18

Sermon Title: Love and Fear

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 do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so 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 reached perfection in love. 19 We love[b] because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have

seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

This is the Word of the Lord...

Prayer...

Introduction:

This morning we are exploring chapter 2 in our book Surrender to Love by David Benner. I just returned from traveling to North Carolina and I spent some time flying across the United States. I have very little fear of flying in general. I do have a slight fear of turbulence when I fly. And for that reason, I am in awe of flight attendants and how they stay composed during the flight when the weather gets a little choppy in the air. The flight attendants will say calmly, please return to your seats as we are experiencing a bit of turbulence. What I expect them to say is, oh my goodness this is

crazy. I hope we make it. Please stay seated and pray for God to save us now. Some of you know that I have a fairly eclectic Christian story, which means that I consider myself a Christian with a background in Reformed Presbyterian faith, but also Evangelical, contemplative, charismatic, holiness, and social justice informed Christian traditions. Somehow my charismatic faith always comes out during flights with turbulence because my instinct is to grip my seat and start praying quietly to myself in tongues. Usually, people don't notice. And yet somehow these wonderful flight attendants keep calm and carry on with seemingly little fear.

Our topic today is love and fear. We all have various fears, which is normal as part of our human experience. In David Benner's book he focuses especially on the topic of love and fear in relation to God.

Benner at the beginning of his chapter reflects on Einstein's idea that everyone needs to ask the important question whether the universe is friendly. Benner suggests that many people do not feel

the universe is friendly and have the tendency to fear God. Many religions including parts of Christianity seem to have the understanding that God must be appeased in order to not face God's wrath. Benner grew up in an environment that encouraged him to accept Christ into his heart in order to avoid hellfire and damnation. He accepted Christ at 10 out of fear of hell. Later, he learned to surrender his life to God not out of fear but out of love.

Benner reminds us that Christianity can sometimes give us mixed messages about God and fear. Some passages in Scripture tell us to fear not, such as when the angels speak to the shepherds. Other passages suggest that we are to fear God. Proverbs 1:7 says that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Are we to fear God or not is the question?

Many Christians feel comfortable with an unfriendly God because that is how we were raised to think about God. Benner writes...

“Some Christians bristle at the notion that love, not fear, should characterize their response to God. It overturns everything they have learned about how to position themselves in relation to the cosmos and the divine. In a strange way they have actually become comfortable with an unfriendly God who should be feared. Not settling for awe or reverence, they live with a fear of the God who keeps them in their place by ensuring their continued distress.

Is this the response that the Christian God invites from us? I am convinced it is not. The Christian God wants intimacy of our friendship, not our fear. The Christian God comes to us with gestures of breathtaking love, hoping to eliminate our fear, not manipulate us through it. And he offers his love as the one thing in the universe capable of making an otherwise hostile cosmos into a friendly home. He offers his love as the one thing in the universe capable of freeing us from our fears.”

I really love how clear Benner is in the passage I just read about his own perspective. I agree with him that we do not need to fear God. We can revere and respect God. Absolutely. It is good to be in awe of God, but for me actual fear of God feels like an ancient understanding of God that as followers of Jesus, we can begin to let go of, so that we can experience a deeper surrender to a God of love. My dad has a story from his childhood. He was just starting out at school in kindergarten and his mom, my grandma, would look him in the eye before sending him off to school and remind him. Love casts out all fear. With this encouraging word, my dad would face the unknowns of elementary school.

Isn't it a nice idea to think of the God of the universe as the one that might want to encourage children to not be afraid and to face life with courage and love rather than fear.

I have a theory that Christians are often comfortable with fearing God because as children we were taught to fear people in authority.

The old idea is that kids need discipline and fear in order to not become wild rebellious delinquents. I get the spirit behind this idea, but I am hoping our society might become mature enough to approach children with love and support. The best parenting models I know focus on being firm but kind. It is frankly an old school model to think that we need to instill fear in children to help them behave. Instead, we need to show children, youth, and adults love, earn their respect, and then provide appropriate guidance. Fear does not have to be in the equation.

Even if we might think that children should have some fear of adults when they are young to help them behave, doesn't it make sense that as a child grows into adulthood that fear should go away and be replaced by a more mature peer relationship of trust.

My conviction is that Jesus in John 15 calls his disciples' friends because he is demonstrating that God wants to be our friend. Yes, God is our Father and Mother. God is strong and has authority in the

world. But God ultimately does not want to be feared. God wants to be our friend.

As we mature in our relationship with God through his son Jesus, and by the power of the Holy Spirit we can surrender into the beautiful idea that God is for us and not against us, God does not need our fear, only our love, respect, and humility. God is love and only love. This truth has great power to heal the wounds of our past and our present.

Now I understand that the idea that God is safe, approachable, and not to be feared may feel new to us. Many of us might have grown up with the image of God as distant and unknowable. The reason God became human in Jesus is so that we can grow to know that God is approachable, safe, and kind. We do not need to be scared of God any longer.

As a spiritual director, I often meet with people who have experienced some form of trauma from their upbringing. This also

may include trauma from a difficult church experience. Part of why I became a pastor is so that I could eventually find myself in a position of leadership where I can teach my understanding of the image of God as grace, hope, peace, and love. It is a humbling thing to be a pastor or spiritual director and teach about God's image. Of course, there is an element of understanding God that acknowledges that God is much bigger than us and beyond our comprehension. I have no problem being reminded of the mystery of God. My concern is that sometimes as part of the mystery of God we feel the necessity to think of God as less than loving.

We read stories in Scripture that scare us, such as Noah's Ark, where God sends a flood to wipe out a whole bunch of people, while saving only a few, and we feel pressure to make sense of a God who is both good and deeply dangerous. Maybe, we are even attracted to an unpredictable God, who can surprise us with his dark side at any moment.

But my fear is that this image of God is actually what is causing our world to become more violent. A God that we fear feels like an archaic God. More like the God of the ancient Greeks, who believed Zeus might throw down lightning bolts.

Maybe, what Christianity and other world religions need is not a God who creates fear, but a God who embodies only love. Only a perfectly loving God is worthy of worship. A God who creates intimacy with us is much more attractive than a God who requires fear.

We know this is true in our human relationships. We know that our good friends are the ones who have our back and who treat us with respect and kindness. We should have the same expectation that the God we worship embody minimally the traits that we expect in good human beings. God does not get a pass because God is the Lord of the Universe. We should expect God to embody the love that we need.

Friends, the good news is that at least parts of the Bible do teach that God is love, that love casts out fear, and that God is revealed as love through his son Jesus, and through the power of the Holy Spirit that only comes in love to comfort us.

So, what we do with the stories that exist in Scripture that make us think God might be scary. Well, you can decide how you wish to read the Bible. What I like to do is hold some things as a mystery. I admit I don't understand everything about how God is revealed in the Bible.

I also recognize that the Bible is written by people of different cultures and times in history. The view of God among the ancient Hebrew people, might be somewhat different than my own. As Christians, we read the Bible through the lens of the story of Jesus. The Old Testament reflects the understanding of God before Jesus enters the scene and much of the New Testament is written by the Apostle Paul or someone who was influenced by Paul. I will pause here and say I am indebted to wonderful Biblical Scholars like our

own Melissa Ramos who helps us read Scripture with humility and a lens of God's love and grace. All of the Bible should be read with appreciation for the inspiration of Scripture, but we also need to be careful that we read it through a lens that is honoring of a God of love.

We as modern-day Christians remain deeply devoted to God as revealed in Scripture, but it is also safe to come to God with our questions, and it is okay to read the Bible through a lens where we understand that God is only love.

At this point in my life, I am comfortable with saying that the Bible is inspired by God and that the Holy Spirit, along with the broader Christian community in the present and the past help me to interpret the Bible. I am comfortable with saying that the interpretation that feels most helpful for me at this time is that God does not need to be feared.

I would prefer that we interpret the text that says, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom with a more modern understanding that the reverence or awe of God is the beginning of wisdom. I actually think the original writers of these ideas about fear of God came from a culture and people that sometimes did fear God, but I don't want to be afraid of God anymore, so I reinterpret those passages to mean for me that God is to be respected but not feared.

My relationship with God is a friendship and friends don't fear each other, even if your friend is the Lord of the universe. I don't believe God wants us to fear her. She is good. She is like a mother that cradles her children. He is also like a father who protects his own. God is like a lover who longs to hold us close. Unfortunately, we have often kept God at arm's length, fearing her intimacy, when all she want to do is be our closest friend.

So let us pray about what it means to follow a God who in only love and does not need to cause us fear. And if you have a different

interpretation about how we might approach God, that is fine. In our church, we can explore different theological ideas with humility and openness. I like to challenge us sometimes to think of God in more hopeful ways than the image of God I grew up with that often created in me fear. Like always, if this topic brings up questions or thoughts, feel free to email me or we can meet for coffee or in my office to talk more.

I go back to that verse again, love casts out fear. Where do you desire unnecessary fear to be cast out of your life? How might your fear of God actually be keeping you from greater experience of God's love? How might your image of God grow to see God as more loving and compassionate towards you and our world? Let us ponder these things and continue to learn to surrender to God's love in this season of Lent. AMEN.

