I sometimes cringe when I hear preachers talk about the day of judgment for God’s people. Let me offer a footnote before I go on. To stand before God is not something to take lightly. Only a fool would approach it with anything other than solemnity and humility. But to describe our judgment as the time in which God publicly exposes all of our sins—every errant thought, word, or deed, fails to account for the profound love God has for his children. As parents, we are capable of calling our children to judgment for what they did wrong, but even we do so without trying to humiliate them or publicly expose them to shame. How much more our Heavenly Father? Fear-based holiness may work, but it makes God out to be someone he is not. Verses 19-21 conclude this passage.

God’s Love & Ours (vv 19-21)

19 We love because he first loved us. 20 If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

John states clearly that our love is a response to God’s love. In fact, it’s only because of God’s love that we know what love is. 1 John 3:16 says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” What’s more, it’s only because of his love that we are able to love him back. In John 6:44, Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” Truly we love God because he first loved us. But God’s love not only enables us to love him in return, but also leads us to love others. It turns out that love not only casts out fear, but hatred as well. Why? Because that’s the nature of true, God-like love. God didn’t love us because we were his friends, but even while we were His enemies (Romans 5:10). So also, if God-like love lives in us, and transforms us according to its nature, then we will begin to love people like God does, which is to say even if and while they’re still our enemies. That’s why Jesus tells his followers, one of whom was John, to “love [their] enemies and pray for those who persecute [them], that [they] may be sons of their Father in heaven (Matthew 5:44-45).” When we’re transformed by the Father’s love, we will begin to love the way the Father loves. John then lays it all out there: those who claim to love God yet hate their brother or sister are liars. Whoever loves God must also love his neighbor.

Jesus himself brought Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18 together when he said: “37 Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” John’s point is that these two commands are not two isolated commands, but flow out of the same mind. They are the nature of true, God-like love.

Conclusions

One, we apply this by making sure that we’re walking in confidence with God, which we do by abiding in him and in his love, and by allowing his love to cast out our fears. To say it another way: we shouldn’t be insecure in our walk with God, but neither should we feel secure for the wrong reasons. And if we struggle to walk securely with the Lord, the answer is to spend more time with him—in silence, in prayer, in his word, in worship, praying with someone. The answer to insecurity is to grow in love. The answer to fear is to grow in love. And the answer to growing in love is to abide with the Father and let him abide with you.

Two, we apply this by measuring the maturity of our love for God, and our trust in his love for us, by considering how much power fear has in our lives, and the extent of our love for other people.
Introduction
Good morning and happy mother’s day. There can be little doubt that very few people in our lives do more to shape us as human beings that our mothers. And that very few virtues are used more powerfully by our mothers than love. If you think for a moment about a passage like 1 Corinthians 13, you realize that our mother’s truly display love: they are patient, kind, do not insist on their own way, bear all things, endure all things, and so the list goes on. As such it’s fitting that we honor our mothers on this day. Today, I want to preach the second part of the sermon I preached last Sunday on trusting in God’s love. In order to do that, I want us to read 1 John 4:13-21, but we’ll focus our attention on verses 17-21.

1 John 4:17-21: The Effects of Living in Love

13 By this we know that we remain 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 Savior 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 believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 17 By this is love perfected with us, that we have confidence for the day of judgment. 18 For as we are, so is he also in this world. 19 And he who keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in God. And we know that we abide in him and he in us, by that he has given us of his Spirit.

The last phrase in verse 17 is a little tricky: “because as he is so also are we in this world.” I don’t have time to walk through all of the issues here, so let me just summarize this as I see it: John is saying that in this world we are, and should be like Jesus in terms of our relationship with the Father, which was built on love, obedience, and fellowship. John 15:9-10 says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.” If you keep your commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. The more we abide in God and he in us, the more we love him and trust in his love for us, the more we obey God because of our love for him, the more we look like Jesus and the more confidence we have in in meeting God face to face.

It’s worth pausing here because I think it’s entirely possible to understand John’s logic without experiencing the power of what he just said. Our confidence comes not from our best efforts to reform our least sanctified behaviors, but from abiding with God and letting him abide with us. Our confidence comes from growing in our love for God and learning to trust in his love for us. That’s what leads to greater obedience, and greater confidence, not because we’re afraid of judgment, but because we’re filled with love. If you’re filled with fear and dread as you look to the day of your judgment, trying harder isn’t the answer. The answer is to abide in God and in his love and let his love transform you in the way that only his love can transform.

While the day of judgment will be a day of shame and punishment for the wicked, such will not be the case for the righteous. Instead, we will have confidence on that day. Not arrogance. Not entitlement. But the confidence that comes from mutual abiding and the results it produces, one of which is a life of love—where we love like God loves us, our love translates into patience with one another, bearing each other’s burdens, showing hospitality, and even beginning to love our enemies. Remember, those things are not the requirements for confidence, but the result of God’s work in our lives and one part of the assurance we have.

Verse 18
Verse 18 then, emphatically exposes the enemy of love, which is fear. There is no fear in love, John says. Here, as he is wont to do, John states the truth of verse 17 another way: just as love brings confidence, so also it drives away that which steals our confidence, namely fear. We can and should reverence God, which is sometimes described in scripture as fearing him, or standing in awe of him. But as his children, who confess Jesus as the Son of God, in whom the Spirit dwells, we cannot be afraid of God, or afraid that he will punish us, because we fear him in that way and at the same time trust in his love. Part of what set Jesus apart, and caused others to take notice, was the profound sense intimacy he had with the Father. In Romans 8:15, Paul reminds the believers “…you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’

Why are fear and love mutually exclusive in this case? Fear has to do with punishment, John says. Again, I think Adam and Eve provide a great example. In Genesis 3:9, God calls out to Adam, “Where are you?” Adam responds in verse ten, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” Adam was afraid because his sin had been exposed and he knew that punishment was sure to follow. Adam was right to be afraid. Why then, as God’s imperfect people, is it so wrong for us to be afraid of God’s judgment? It’s wrong because unlike Adam, our sin is not exposed. It has been washed away. “As far as the east is from the west,” the Psalmist says, “so far has God removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:12).” 2Corinthians 5:21 says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God which is in him who sinned.”

And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Verse 21
Verse 21 then, reminds us of where we are headed. Love for God is love for the world, John says. If anyone loves God, he is love because he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.