

Homiletics Analysis: 1 John 4

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First John 4 falls within John's extended pastoral letter to a congregation or network of congregations facing the twin threats of false teaching and fractured love. The chapter divides naturally into two intertwined movements. The first (vv. 1–6) addresses the testing of spirits: not every spirit is from God, and the defining test is Christological — does the spirit confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? The Antichrist spirit denies this, and those who belong to the world will listen to those voices. The second and larger movement (vv. 7–21) develops the inseparable connection between God's love and the community's love for one another. John grounds this connection in the nature of God Himself — “God is love” (vv. 8, 16) — and in the specific, historical, costly act that defined that love: the sending of the Son as the propitiation for sins (v. 10). Love is not a human achievement or ethical ideal but a divine gift, originating in God before it is reflected in us. The argument builds to the claim that love for one another is both the evidence of genuine abiding in God and the overflow of having received His love. Fear is the enemy of this love (v. 18), and perfect love — love rooted in God's own love — drives out fear. The chapter closes by declaring the test inseparable from the one before it: you cannot claim to love God while hating your brother.

This Text — Intent:

John is not primarily teaching doctrine about love or warning abstractly about false teachers. He is pressing his readers — who are apparently shaken by doctrinal defection, social fracture, and fear — toward settled assurance and active, costly love. God is seeking through this passage to accomplish three things simultaneously: (1) to reorient the reader's epistemological confidence by anchoring the test of true teaching in Christological confession rather than spiritual impressiveness; (2) to confront the reader with the origin and nature of love in such a way that failure to love is exposed as a failure to know God; and (3) to drive out the fear that is crippling both confident witness and genuine community life — replacing it with the boldness that comes from knowing you are already loved and that your love for others is itself evidence of that reality.

Subject Sentence: God's own love, revealed in the incarnate Son, is the origin, test, and drive of all genuine Christian love and confidence.

Primary Claim: Because God’s love for us is prior, specific, and self-giving — proven in the sending and sacrifice of His Son — we are freed from fear, equipped to test every spirit, and called to love one another as the living evidence that we know Him.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Testing of Spirits (vv. 1–6) — Charismatic/Pentecostal Reading: The Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions rightly recognize that the injunction to “test the spirits” presupposes genuine spiritual activity — John is not dismissing the reality of prophetic gifts or spiritual manifestations. Where this tradition sometimes overreaches is in treating the test as primarily about accompanying signs, spiritual power, or emotional experience, rather than as a strictly Christological confession. John’s criterion is doctrinal and verbal: “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (v. 2). The decisive test is not whether a teaching is accompanied by power, or whether its source is impressive or sincere, but whether it affirms the full humanity of the incarnate Son. This is a refutation of the alternative criterion — signs and spiritual power are not the test; Christological confession is. That said, the Charismatic tradition’s insistence on the real and present activity of the Spirit in discernment is not wrong — John himself presupposes this.

“God is Love” (vv. 8, 16) — Liberal/Progressive Reading: The liberal theological tradition frequently deploys “God is love” as the master interpretive key to the entire biblical narrative — evacuating divine wrath, minimizing propitiation, and collapsing the entirety of Christian ethics into inclusive relational warmth. This reading must be firmly qualified. John does not say “love is God” — the predication runs in one direction and is controlled by its subject. “God is love” is a statement about God’s nature, but that nature is immediately defined by what God *did*: “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” (v. 10). “Propitiation” is load-bearing — it presupposes a real offense, a real wrath, and a real substitutionary satisfaction. You cannot retain “God is love” from verse 8 while editing out “propitiation” from verse 10 — the two statements are grammatically and theologically connected. The Reformed reading acknowledges the statement’s full weight: God *is* love, and His love is holy, purposeful, substitutionary, and costly.

Love as Evidence of Regeneration (vv. 7–8) — Arminian/Wesleyan Reading: The Wesleyan tradition, with its emphasis on holiness and the perfection of love in the believer, rightly highlights the ethical seriousness of John’s claims — genuine love is expected to be visible and habitual, not merely professed. Where the tradition sometimes overreaches is in treating the “perfectionism” of verse 18 (“perfect love casts out fear”) as a description of a second-work crisis experience, rather than as the ongoing, progressively realized fruit of abiding in the love of God. John’s grammar here is not crisis-shaped but relational and ongoing: the one who *abides* in love abides in God (v. 16). The Reformed reading retains the ethical seriousness — love is the evidence and fruit of regeneration, not merely an

aspiration — while grounding it in union with Christ rather than in a distinct sanctifying experience. The Wesleyan contribution worth retaining is its resistance to easy intellectualism: John will not let love remain an idea.

“We love because he first loved us” (v. 19) — Semi-Pelagian/Moralistic Reading: The most practically common misreading across traditions — including broadly evangelical ones — is treating this chapter as primarily motivational exhortation: “try harder to love each other.” This approach leaves the structure of verse 19 intact syntactically but inverts its force — treating the indicative (“he first loved us”) as a nice background point and the imperative (“we love”) as the main thing. John’s logic is the reverse: the indicative is the engine; the imperative is the output. Love originates in God, flows to us through the Son, and overflows into the community — and where it does not overflow, John diagnoses not a motivational failure but a theological one: “Whoever does not love does not know God” (v. 8). The moralistic reading produces guilt; the Reformed reading produces gospel-driven transformation.

Key Canonical Support

- **John 3:16–17** — The Father’s sending of the Son is the primary datum of divine love in John’s Gospel; 1 John 4 treats this same event as the definitive definition of love itself, grounding the letter’s ethics in the Gospel’s theology.
 - **Romans 5:6–8** — “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Paul’s logic parallels John’s: love is defined by prior, undeserved, costly action — not by response or merit — grounding the same “we love because He first loved us” structure.
 - **Deuteronomy 6:4–5 / Leviticus 19:18** — The twofold love commandment (love God / love neighbor) lies behind John’s insistence that these cannot be separated. John is not innovating — he is expositing the unity that runs through the entire covenant, now fulfilled in Christ.
 - **Isaiah 53:4–6, 10** — The Suffering Servant passage provides the Old Testament grounding for propitiation — the specific mechanism of love John identifies in verse 10. God’s love has always been sacrificially substitutionary; the incarnation is the fulfillment of the pattern.
 - **2 Corinthians 5:14–21** — “The love of Christ controls us” and “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them” — Paul’s reconciliation passage parallels John’s structure: God’s prior act of love in the Son defines the content and motive of the community’s life and mission.
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Aim: To establish that authentic Christian life — in its discernment, its love, and its freedom from fear — flows entirely from receiving and abiding in God’s love for us in Christ, not from producing it ourselves.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
4:1	Command to test the spirits; not every spirit is from God; false prophets have gone out into the world	Opens with an imperative grounded in a theological reality — spiritual activity is real but mixed
4:2–3	The Christological test: confessing Jesus Christ has come in the flesh = from God; denying this = spirit of antichrist	Doctrinal and verbal criterion; the antichrist spirit is already at work
4:4	“You are from God... he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world”	Confidence rooted in the indwelling Spirit, not in the believers’ own spiritual discernment
4:5–6	Those from the world speak from the world and are heard by the world; those from God hear the apostolic teaching	Two audiences, two authorities; the test is not just Christological confession but alignment with apostolic teaching
4:7–8	Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God; whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love	First declaration of “God is love”; love as evidence of regeneration and knowledge of God
4:9–10	God’s love was made manifest in the sending of the Son; definition of love: not our love for God but His for us — propitiation	The incarnation is the revelation and definition of love; propitiation is the mechanism
4:11	Since God so loved us, we ought to love one another	The indicative (v. 9–10) grounds the imperative (v. 11) — gospel logic, not moralism
4:12	No one has seen God; if we love one another, God	The community’s love is the visible manifestation of the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	abides in us and His love is perfected in us	invisible God — extraordinary ecclesiological claim
4:13–15	The Spirit as confirmation of abiding in God; apostolic witness to the Son; confessing Jesus as Son of God = abiding	Spirit and Word together confirm the reality of abiding; Christological confession again central
4:16	“God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him”	Second declaration of “God is love”; the mutual abiding framed in terms of love
4:17–18	Love being perfected = boldness on the day of judgment; no fear in love; perfect love casts out fear; fear has to do with punishment	The teleology of love: not just ethics but eschatological confidence; fear exposed as a punishment-expectation that love displaces
4:19	“We love because he first loved us”	The simplest and most profound statement of the chapter’s logic — all love originates in God’s prior love
4:20–21	Claiming to love God while hating a brother is a lie; you cannot love the unseen God while refusing to love the seen brother; command to love both	The test is made concrete and social; theological profession disconnected from community love is exposed as self-deception

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	4:1–6	Testing Every Spirit — The Christological Criterion
2	4:7–12	The Origin of Love — God’s Nature and God’s Act
3	4:13–16	Abiding in Love — Spirit, Word, and Mutual Indwelling
4	4:17–21	The Fruit of Love — Boldness, Freedom from Fear, and the Inseparable

Division	Verses	Label
		Test

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God's own love, revealed in the incarnate Son, is the origin, test, and drive of all genuine Christian love and confidence.

Primary Claim: Because God's love for us is prior, specific, and self-giving — proven in the sending and sacrifice of His Son — we are freed from fear, equipped to test every spirit, and called to love one another as the living evidence that we know Him.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Let the test be Christological, not experiential. The church in every generation is tempted to adjudicate spiritual authority by impressiveness — by the emotional power of a speaker, the signs accompanying a ministry, or the spiritual language a teacher uses. John will not let this stand. The test is not how compelling the voice is but what it says about Jesus. When you encounter a new teaching, a new spiritual influence, or a new voice claiming divine authority, ask the one question John asks: what does this say about the person and work of Jesus Christ? A teaching that subtly deflects from the full humanity and full divinity of the incarnate Son — however spiritually sophisticated — has failed the only test that matters. Build the habit of Christological discernment, not spiritual-temperature discernment.

2. [Mind/Belief] — Receive the definition of love before you try to practice it. Most failures of love in the Christian community are not primarily motivational failures — they are definitional failures. We carry into the community a pre-existing definition of love drawn from culture, family of origin, or emotional instinct, and we apply that definition to our relationships. John tears that definition down and replaces it. Love is not a feeling, not a relational warmth, not even a sustained effort of will. Love is what God did: He sent His Son as a propitiation for our sins while we were still enemies. That act — costly, prior, undeserved, substitutionary — is love's definition. Before you attempt to love anyone this week, sit with verses 9–10 long enough to let that definition replace the one you imported.

3. [Affections/Worship] — Let the prior love of God fill the space that fear has been occupying. John identifies fear with painful expectation of punishment (v. 18) — the anxious sense that you have not done enough, that judgment looms, that you stand before God as a debtor who cannot pay. This fear is not holy reverence; it is the symptom of a heart that has not yet settled into the reality of propitiation. The Son was sent as the atoning sacrifice — which means the punishment question has been answered, not deferred. Every anxiety about your standing before God is a failure to receive what verse 10 declares. Let the Spirit use this passage to displace fear not by telling yourself to stop

being afraid, but by returning again and again to the specific historical act — the sending, the sacrifice, the propitiation — that exhausted the punishment that fear anticipates.

4. [Affections/Worship] — Worship the God whose love moves from Him to you — not a God who waits to see if you will move first. “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us” (v. 10) — John’s direction of travel is theologically decisive. Every form of religion that is not rooted in this passage ultimately reverses that arrow: it begins with human striving, human devotion, human reach toward God, and understands divine favor as the response. John says the gospel is the permanent, unalterable reversal of that direction. God moved first. God gave first. God loved first. The appropriate response to this is not self-congratulation for having responded well — it is worship of a God whose love is nothing like what we imagined love to be. Let your affection for God be shaped by His initiative, not by your own spiritual performance.

5. [Will/Behavior] — Stop performing love for God in a register you refuse to show your brother. John’s closing argument is deliberately blunt: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (v. 20). This is not a gentle nuance — it is a diagnostic. The person in your congregation who is difficult to love, the brother or sister with whom you have unresolved conflict, the person whose personality or history makes warmth feel impossible — that relationship is not a minor relational inconvenience sitting alongside your love for God. It is the concrete test of whether your love for God is real. You cannot route love toward the invisible God around the visible brother. Name the relationship. Make the move. John 4:12 says the community’s love is how the invisible God becomes visible — your unloving relationship with your brother is, by John’s standard, an act of theological concealment.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First John 4 provides two of the most theologically concentrated statements in the New Testament: “God is love” (vv. 8, 16) and “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” (v. 10). These statements are not separable. “God is love” apart from verse 10 becomes an abstraction that can be emptied of content by any sentiment; verse 10 defines what “God is love” actually means in history and at cost. The chapter also grounds the doctrine of propitiation not in a legal technicality but in the very nature of God — it was God’s own love that sent the propitiation, which means wrath and love are not in tension in God but are both expressions of His holy, purposeful character. Finally, the pneumatology of verse 13 (the Spirit as the confirmation of abiding in God) grounds Christian assurance not in emotional experience or moral performance but in the triune gift: Spirit, Son, and Father all operative in the believer’s life and the community’s love.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter is a masterpiece of what Reformed theology understands as the indicative-imperative structure of the gospel. Every imperative in the chapter — test the spirits, love one another, do not fear — is grounded entirely in a prior theological indicative: the love of God, the sending of the Son, the propitiation accomplished, the Spirit given. The Reformation’s insistence that grace precedes and produces obedience, rather than obedience earning or sustaining grace, is the precise structure of John’s argument in verses 7–21. Moreover, the propitiation of verse 10 stands as a concise statement of the substitutionary atonement that is both the center of Reformed soteriology and the foundation of assurance — the one who is propitiated is not merely appeased but fully satisfied, which is the basis for the fearlessness of verse 18. Reformed theology has always understood that the assurance of salvation is grounded in the object of faith, not the quality of faith — and this chapter anchors that conviction: it is the prior love of God, historically accomplished in the Son, that drives out fear, not the perfection of the believer’s own love.

Main Takeaway

God loved you first — completely, at great cost, before you responded — and that love, made concrete in the sending and sacrifice of His Son, is the only thing that can drive out the fear that keeps you both anxious before God and cold toward your brother. Stop trying to generate love from the inside. Receive the love that already moved toward you. Then let it overflow.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Preaching “God is love” without “propitiation.”** The phrase “God is love” in verse 8 is one of the most frequently extracted phrases in Christian communication, and it is almost always stripped from its immediate context — verse 10, where John defines what that love looked like in action. “God is love” preached without propitiation produces a sentimentalized deity who makes no real demands and whose love costs nothing. The two statements are grammatically and theologically one unit. If you preach verse 8, you must preach verse 10.
- **Treating this chapter as primarily motivational rather than theological.** The dominant preaching failure on this passage is using John’s “love one another” imperatives as the main point, with God’s love as motivational scaffolding. This inverts John’s own logic. The theological indicatives — God’s nature, God’s act, the propitiation, the prior love — are the main content. The imperatives are output, not

input. A sermon that primarily exhorts people to love more will not accomplish what John is trying to accomplish. A sermon that grounds people deeply in the specific, historical act of divine love will produce love as fruit rather than striving.

- **Misreading “perfect love casts out fear” as a claim about the believer’s own perfected love.** This phrase (v. 18) is frequently interpreted as: “If you can achieve sufficiently mature love, your fear will go away.” This reading makes the believer’s love the active agent driving out fear, which collapses back into moralism and ironically produces more anxiety, not less. The operative love in verse 18 is God’s love being “perfected in us” (v. 17) — completed, brought to its intended end, fully realized in the community that abides in it. It is received love, not achieved love, that drives out fear.
- **Abstracting the test of verse 20 away from specific relationships.** “Hating your brother” is sometimes treated as a vivid rhetorical hyperbole meaning roughly “not being generally warm toward fellow Christians.” John means something more concrete — specific, ongoing failure to love a specific person is a diagnostic indicator about the reality of love for God. Preachers should press this to the concrete level: who is the brother? What is the unresolved situation? The text will not be applied if it remains abstract.
- **Treating the Christological test (vv. 1–6) as historically distant.** The testing-spirits passage is routinely treated as relevant to the first-century Docetist context and then noted as a kind of curiosity before moving to the “real” application in verses 7–21. This is a significant loss. The principle is permanently and structurally relevant: spiritual impressiveness and Christological error are not mutually exclusive, and the specific test — does this voice affirm the full humanity of the incarnate Son? — applies equally to contemporary prosperity theology, spirituality-without-doctrine movements, and any teaching that functionally marginalizes the incarnation and atonement in favor of therapeutic or experiential categories.
- **Separating the two halves of the chapter as unrelated topics.** The chapter’s two movements — discernment (vv. 1–6) and love (vv. 7–21) — are frequently treated as distinct themes awkwardly joined in one chapter. They are not. The Christological test of the first section and the love-ethic of the second section share a common foundation: the incarnation of the Son (v. 2 = “come in the flesh”; v. 9 = “God sent his only Son into the world”). The same event — the Father sending the incarnate Son — is both the criterion for testing spirits and the definition of love. A complete exposition shows this structural unity.