

CONCERNING THE FEAR OF GOD

—by Abba Dorotheos—

St. John the Evangelist says the following in his General Epistle: **“Perfect love casts fear away” (1 Jn. 4:18)**. What does the Apostle want to tell us? Which love is he talking about, and which fear is he referring to?

The Prophet David says, **“Fear the Lord, all His saints” (Ps. 33:10)**. Thousands of similar verses are found throughout the Holy Scriptures. If even the saints—who love the Lord so much—are also afraid of Him, how is it possible for “perfect love to cast away fear,” as the Evangelist states? The holy Apostle wants to show us that there are two types of fear: one that is introductory, and another that is perfect. One is characteristic of people who are just beginning the spiritual life; whereas the other is characteristic of the saints who have attained perfection, and who have reached the level of holy love.

What I want to say is this: Someone may keep God’s commandments because he is afraid of being punished. As we have already stated, such a person is still a beginner. This person does not struggle on account of virtue itself but because he fears being punished. Another person does the will of God because he loves God, and because he especially loves to be pleasing to God. Such a person knows the value of virtue and realizes what it means to be with God. This is the person who possesses true love, which the Evangelist refers to as “perfect” love, and this love in turn leads him to perfect fear. This person is afraid and keeps God’s commandments not because he may be punished, not because he may be condemned to Hell, but, as we have said, because he has tasted how sweet it truly is to be united with God, and he fears losing and being deprived of this sweetness. This perfect fear, which arises from such love, casts away the introductory fear. This is why the Apostle says, “Perfect love casts fear away.” We must realize, however, that it is impossible for someone to arrive at this perfect fear if he does not first pass through the introductory fear.

As St. Basil the Great says, there are three types of dispositions with which we are capable of pleasing God. The first is when we keep God’s commandments because we are afraid of Hell; in this instance we are in the position of a slave. The second is when we fulfill God’s commandments because it is profitable for us and we desire to receive payment and to be rewarded; in this case we resemble employees. The third is when we do so on account of virtue itself; in this instance we hold the title of a son. For when a son reaches a mature age, he carries out the will of his father not because he is afraid of being punished, not because he wants to receive payment from him, but because he loves his father, and he pays special

attention to always love and respect his father, convinced that everything that his father owns belongs to him as well. Such a person becomes worthy of hearing the following words: **“Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ” (Gal. 4:7)**. Such a person no longer fears God (with introductory fear, of course) as we have already said, but he loves God, as Saint Anthony stated: “I no longer fear God, but I love Him.”

When the Lord said to Abraham (after he offered his son to Him), **“Now I have come to know that you fear God” (Gen. 22:12)**, He was referring to the perfect fear that results from love. Why else would He have said, **“Now I know”**? Abraham did so many things prior to this. He obeyed God, abandoned everything he had, and went to live in a foreign land amongst a nation of idolaters, where there was not even a trace of godliness. After all this, the Lord put him through the most-difficult test of sacrificing his own son. Finally, He told him, “Now I have come to know that you fear God.” It is clear that God was referring to the perfect fear that the saints possess. For the saints no longer do God’s will because they fear Hell or hoping to receive a reward; rather, they love Him, as we have repeatedly stated, fearing not to do anything contrary to the will of Him Whom they love. This is why it has been said, “Love casts away fear.” For they no longer do things out of fear; rather, they fear as a result of love. This is the perfect fear.

But it is not possible for someone to arrive at perfect fear, as we previously stated, if one does not first acquire the introductory fear. For it is written, **“The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord” (Ps. 110:10)**. Additionally, **“The beginning and the end is the fear of God” (Pr. 1:7, 9:10, 22:4)**. When it says “the beginning,” it is referring to the introductory fear, which is then replaced by perfect fear which the saints have.

Introductory fear is appropriate for us and our spiritual level. It guards the soul from every evil, just as tinning protects steel from rust. For the Scriptures say, **“With the fear of the Lord, everyone avoids sin” (Pr. 15:27)**. If someone distances himself from evil due to the fear of punishment, just as a slave who is afraid of his master, he begins in part to execute virtue. In following, as a person executes virtue, he gradually begins to hope and expect a reward for his good deeds, just as a worker does. When a person continues, with God’s help, in virtue indefinitely and comes close to God (according to the measure of his progress), he finally tastes and senses God, Who is the ultimate good, and he no longer wants to be separated from Him. Who can separate this person, as the Apostle said, from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35)? At this point a person has attained the status of a son, he loves virtue on account of virtue alone, and he fears because he loves. This is the great and perfect fear.