

God's Love for Us, Perfected

What is a perfect love? John seems to answer the question when he writes, "...If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12). So, on the surface, it seems that a perfect love for man is one that reaches moral perfection by practicing love. But this clashes with experiential reality. Can such a love ever be achieved by mere mortal man? Is there *anything* that sinful man can truly claim to do perfectly—especially that highest virtue of love? However, upon further investigation, in this case, John is not speaking of a love exercised *by man* that reaches moral flawlessness; that would be to claim sinlessness, which he explicitly disallows (1 John 1:8). Instead, he says that the love exercised *by God for us* reaches its *intended goal*—namely of flowing out in love for others. In this view, 1 John 4:12 is better translated, "If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love *for us* reaches its goal in us." This interpretation will be shown to be better by (1) arguing that the love spoken of here is God's love for man, not man's love for God, and by (2) contending that John employs the sense of *τετελειωμένη* (is perfected) that means to bring to an intended goal, not moral flawlessness.

Who Loves Whom?

Most modern English versions translate ἡ ἀγάπη αὐτοῦ as "His love."¹ However, this somewhat obscures the grammatical options of this construction. Here, αὐτοῦ could be taken as a subjective genitive (His love for us) or an objective genitive (our love for Him). Most commentators contend that it should be taken as a subjective genitive.² There are a couple, however, who take it as a plenary genitive (meaning both objective and subjective simultaneously).³

The strongest argument for the subjective genitive position is the context of 4:12. The pericope begins in 4:7 with the vocative "Beloved" and the subjunctive imperative "let us love one another." John mentions our love *for others* in 4:7 and 4:11, but never our love *for God*. In fact, he explicitly says that we did *not* love God, but rather He loved us (4:10). Therefore, to bring up our love for God in 4:12 would be out of place, and indeed contradictory to the contents of 4:7-11.

Additionally, the closest parallel construction to ἡ ἀγάπη αὐτοῦ (4:12) in the pericope must also refer to God's love for us. In 4:9, John writes that the ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ is manifested by the incarnation. Here τοῦ θεοῦ *cannot* be taken to be objective, for the incarnation is God's action and plan, not man's; therefore, it must be taken as a subjective genitive, meaning God's love *for us*. It is true that in other contexts John's usage of ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ clearly means our

¹ NASB, ESV, HCSB, NIV, NLT, NRSV. In fact, the author could not find one that deviated from this.

² Alan England Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1912), 120. Martin M. Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2004), 111. Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 162n184. Daniel Akin L., *I, 2, 3 John*, vol. 38, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 182.

³ Marshall is representative of such a view when he says, "when we love others, God's love for us has reached its full effect in creating the same kind of love as his in us." I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 217. See also 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 534. While the implications of taking this as a plenary genitive are indeed true (namely, when we love others, we are pouring out God's love for us, which demonstrates our love for God) it is doubtful that this was intended by John. Again, the context shows he is focusing on the love of God for us, and never explicitly mentions our love for Him.

love for God (taking τοῦ θεοῦ as an objective genitive).⁴ But that interpretation is made evident by the context; the meaning of the phrase ought not be interpreted formulaically, but according to literary context. And in the context of 4:12, ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ must mean the love of God for us.

Therefore, the love spoken of in 1 John 4:12 is rightly translated as “His love *for us*,” for it is a love demonstrated by the incarnation of Christ. Yet, this brings up another question. How can God’s love for us be perfected if He, being God, always and only does what is perfect (Matt 5:48)?

How is God’s Love Perfected?

John uses the word τετελειωμένη to describe God’s love for us. Most modern English translations translate it as “is perfected.”⁵ The word τετελειωμένη is a perfect passive participle from the root verb τελειόω, which has two basic meanings: (1) “to complete an activity” and (2) “to overcome the imperfect state of things.”⁶

To deduce John’s meaning, it is useful to survey all of the times he uses the verb. In the Johannine corpus, τελειόω is used in the present tense three times⁷ and in the perfect tense six times.⁸ In the present tense, it always comes from the mouth of Jesus speaking of how He came to τελειώσω the work which the Father gave Him (John 4:34, 5:36, 17:4). Here, Jesus must be using the 1st sense of τελειώσω rather than the 2nd, because He would not claim to be perfecting the inherently imperfect work of the Father, but rather to be *completing* His work.

The six usages of the perfect tense of τελειόω bring out the stative sense of the verb. The usage in John 19:28 is used to mean the 1st sense of τελειόω; on the cross, Jesus knew that “all things τετέλεσται.” This cannot mean that all things had been perfected morally; rather it must mean that things had been accomplished. Similarly, when Jesus prays “that they might be ὡς ἓν τετελειωμένοι as one” (John 17:23), it is best to take in the 1st sense—unto completion—rather than the second. The unity Jesus speaks of He achieved (c.f. Eph 4:3-6); the Father answered His prayer via the pouring out of the Spirit upon the Church.

The remaining four usages of the perfect tense are all in 1 John, and all in reference to the love of God. While the love spoken of in 1 John 2:15 must refer to our love for God,⁹ 1 John 4:12, 17, and 18 are all in the same pericope and therefore should be understood to speak of God’s love for us (as already argued above for 4:12). Since the love is from God, it is also highly unlikely that John would imply God’s love would need to be perfected in some way.

Thus, out of the 9 usages of the verb τελειόω, it *clearly* is used in the sense of completion in at least five usages, and it is highly likely to be the case in the remaining four. It would be quite irregular for John to suddenly switch his usual intention for 1 John 4:12. Just as God’s work cannot be morally perfected, because it is not morally imperfect (c.f. John 4:34, 5:36,

⁴ 1 John 2:5, 2:15, 3:17, 5:3. C.f. Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, 28, 43, 89, 122. Also John 5:42.

⁵ NASB, ESV, HCSB, NRSV. NIV has “is made complete”

⁶ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 996.

⁷ John 4:34, 5:36, 17:4.

⁸ John 17:23, 19:28; 1 John 2:5, 4:12, 4:17, 4:18.

⁹ “Whoever keeps His word, in him ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ τετελείεται” (1 John 2:15). It doesn’t make any sense to say that this is God’s love for us, because a human agent—“whoever”—is doing the action of keeping His word. Even if, for the sake of argument, we concede that God’s love could be morally imperfect, a human cannot bring it to moral perfection.

17:3), neither can God’s love for us be morally perfected, because it is not morally imperfect. Thus, τετελειωμένη in 4:12 must refer to the completing of an activity, particularly “achieving a goal.”¹⁰

Additionally, John uses a periphrastic construction of “τετελειωμένη ἐστίν” in 4:12, which is unique when compared to the other usages of τελειόω. While the periphrastic construction can sometimes be merely a substitution for a normal verb, in some cases it carries an intensive emphasis.¹¹ Since this is the only case where John uses a periphrastic construction with a τετελειωμένη, and since the perfect tense has an intensive nuance, it seems probably that John is emphasizing the results of the action of us loving one another.

Combining all of the above, it seems the te NLT gives the best translation of 1 John 4:12—“...But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.” Or, as Yarbrough synthesizes, “God’s already pristine love finding its fullest possible earthly expression as people respond to the message of Christ and reach out to one another as a result.”¹²

This meaning comports with the structure of 1 John 4:12. John uses ἐὰν and the subjunctive verb ἀγαπῶμεν to form a third-class conditional sentence to indicate a local connection.¹³ This means the relationship between the protasis and the apodosis is not causal, but inferential. To paraphrase 4:12 then, John means, “If we love one another, then we can logically deduce that (1) God abides in us and (2) His love is perfected in us.” The second deduction must be taken in the same manner as the first: “If we love, it is evidence that God abides in us. And, if we love, it is evidence that His love is perfected in us.” How is His love perfected in us? Namely, it has reached its goal, which is that we would pour out His love for us in love for one another. This is the only sense of τετελειωμένη that makes sense in the context.

Conclusion

In a moral sense, everything that God does is perfect—blameless, unblemished, pure, holy. However, in a completion sense, not everything that God does has yet been perfected; there are yet promises waiting to be fulfilled, a yet-future reality that He has, in His perfect wisdom, not brought to the present. However, according to 1 John 4:12, there is one intention of God that indeed we can bring to completion, namely the goal of His love for us, that we would love one another. When believers love their brethren as God has loved us, demonstrated in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, then we fulfill the goal of His love.

¹⁰ Akin, *I, 2, 3 John*, 38:182. See also John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 164–165.

¹¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 575. In speaking of Ephesians 2:88, “The perfect periphrastic construction is most likely intensive, however.”

¹² Robert W. Yarbrough, *I, 2, 3, John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 245. Also see Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, 28–29.

¹³ Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, 696.

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