



Letters of Love
#4 Creating Worlds
April 29, 2018
Courage Church, Detroit, MI
scriptures: 1 John 2:7-14, John
13:34-35, Proverbs 29:11, Proverbs
17:9

We are in a series going piece by piece through the 3 letters of the Apostle John. So this morning if you would please open your Bibles to 1 John 2:7-14

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.

I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

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One thing that we kept saying last week that we need to keep at the forefront of our minds is this reality: to the outside world looking in on who we are, trying to figure out what we are about, and what that actually does to our lives, it can be very easy for truth to look like a lie.

And what we mean by that is this... we know that the Gospel IS TRUTH. we know that there are things in life that are concrete truths, that are real... we can pretend like there is no truth but we know that that is simply not true...

but any time truth doesn't take a hold of your life and actually transform who you are, and make you into someone better than the person you were before you encountered it... it just looks like it was a lie.

And John continues that thought here in verses 7-11... but then in verse 12, he sort of breaks out into this "poetry like" section, saying some really profound and amazing things, and he uses some amazing words that I want to highlight for you.

He says: I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven!

Forgiven is the Greek word: *aphiēmi* (pronounced: ä-fē'-ā-mē) which means "to send away" - what it is saying is that IN JESUS, your sins are NOT here anymore.

He says that he is writing to you, young men, because you are STRONG...

Strong is the Greek word: *ischyros* (pronounced ē-skü-ro's) meaning "of one who has strength of soul to sustain the attacks of Satan" - he says that evil is not more powerful than what is inside of you RIGHT now.

last week we learned about how Jesus is our advocate, or our "parakletos" meaning that he pleads our cause before the judge...

These are words that have absolutely huge implications... they aren't the kind of things that we should take lightly... they are realities that should

change everything about the way that we live our lives... the way that we treat one another, even the way that we view ourselves.

Learning powerful words is cool, but what good is it to know something and never experience it?

We can argue theology until we are blue in the face... we can get every detail right... we can study the Greek and the Hebrew and learn precisely what is being said, and yet if our lives look no different because of it... truth, when it takes on flesh and blood in your life, just looks like a lie.

It looks like fancy words that don't actually mean anything. So that is why I believe that John puts so much of an emphasis on this... **THIS SHOULD BE CHANGING YOU!**

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In the verses we read last week, John talked about keeping the commands of Jesus... and here he says something a bit bizarre about the commands... he says:

I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

He says "its not a new command. its an old command. but its also a new command."

That is clear, isn't it?

This is what I think John is saying...

In John 13:34-35, Jesus says: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

In Matthew 22, a lawyer tries to test Jesus and he asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is, and Jesus sums up the entire law, all 613 commands, into two simple commandments... he says "Love the Lord your God, and Love your neighbor as yourself."

but the reason its no new command, is because these things have always been so. Even when Jesus answers the question of "what is the greatest commandment?" he quotes a famous Jewish passage called the SHEMA. It is Deuteronomy 6:5 - Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul and mind.

So its kind of like this... there are things that we know... and we have always known... but we don't always fully embrace or accept. Like, for instance, we know that Jesus is our advocate (our parakletos)... we know that we shouldn't sin, BUT WHEN WE DO SIN, we have someone who is in our corner who was willing to die for us and in fact already DID.

Yet when we do sin, its very easy to let that totally beat ourselves down... to forget that God already sent His Son to pay for this... that we don't have to spend all of this time depressed because of what we have done...

what is happening? we aren't living in the grace that was given to us, even though our freedom was paid for at SUCH AN INCREDIBLY HIGH PRICE. We are subtly trying to punish ourselves... subtly trying to give ourselves what we think we deserve.

The Gospel has always been true, we just aren't letting it unfold in our lives.

its the same thing with the commands. From the beginning, we had laws... there are tons of laws... and they have always been... but at the heart of the laws WAS ALWAYS THIS CONCEPT THAT GOD LOVED ISRAEL SO MUCH THAT EVEN THOUGH THEY CONTINUE OVER AND OVER TO BREAK HIS HEART, HE STILL LOVES THEM AND PURSUES THEM.

and at the heart of all of those laws is God who KNOWS EVERYTHING and only wants what is best for them... whats best for their health, best for your minds, what is BEST FOR THEIR COMMUNITY... because he

LOVES THEM and wants to see that same love active among them as they live long and healthy lives, hopefully.

but we have over complicated them and let the laws become the point... and that is what Jewish culture had done... when you keep the law, you are close to God, when you fail to keep the law, you are separated from God... that is how they viewed it... But when Jesus gets asked "which of all of these 613 laws is the most important?" He says that you can summarize the entire thing by this phrase:

Love God, Love other people.

Keep your hearts set on love... and it may feel new, but its been there all along... sometimes you just need to hear it packaged a little differently... we have all been part of the company or the team and we say the same idea 50 times and it gets ignored because people are just so used to us and the way we say things that it is easy to miss the depth of it all... then when someone else on the outside comes in and says it, its like its a revelation from Heaven.

Its been there all along... but it needed a new package for people to catch it.

And this new commandment that is really a summary of something that has always been can be stated in one word: love. And John was ALL about love... he begins verse 7 by saying "Beloved, I am writing you..."

People who I absolutely cherish... who I love...

and the whole message is about love.

One commentator (Jerome) tells a story from church history of when John is old and in such a frail place that he can not even walk, and he is living in Ephesus... and he is literally carried into the church to teach, and everyone gathers to hear what the Apostle John has to say... and he preaches the shortest sermon ever... he just says "little children, LOVE ONE ANOTHER."

and after hearing the SAME message for so long, at one point someone speaks up and asks “why do you keep saying that?” in other words: DON'T YOU HAVE ANY OTHER MESSAGES?

and John just says: THAT IS THE LORD'S COMMANDMENT, and if you DO THAT, it is sufficient.

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And I think that it is very significant that even though Jesus talked a ton about loving OTHERS... and John echo's that ideal... how important it is to love broken people and meet them where they are at... John's writing has a very large emphasis on the fact that people will see Jesus IN US by the way that we LOVE ONE ANOTHER. By the way we take care of each other, by the way that we are called to each others sides.

Look at verses 9 and 10:

“Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.”

You can't say you love God and yet still hate another person... you can't be in community with people and at the same time be holding something against them... yet I believe whole heartedly that this is one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the entire church. I've seen it my whole life.

We convince ourselves that we live in light, and are following Jesus, yet we are harboring something against someone else... unforgiveness is the most deceiving, destructive thing we could carry... and it starts subtly, and it eats away at a person and destroys a community. The Bible is so clear about this... there is unbelievable power in unforgiveness and it is not the kind of power that you want to have.

There is no reason to hate your brother. I know that there are a thousand excuses to hate your brother... there are a lot of things we can say to justify hating our brother... I know a lot of people do very bad things to others and it is hard to not allow those things to consume us. But forgiveness is always

more about us than it is the person we are forgiving. Even here, what does John say? IT IS YOU WHO IS STILL IN DARKNESS, if you have hatred for another person.

and John says that even though it is YOU in darkness... this is a big deal because its never, EVER just about you. It is always about the entire community. It is always about the whole church... the whole family.

I want you to see this... the last line says: "in him there is no cause for stumbling."

This is fascinating because what it says is that "IT IS HATE FOR ANOTHER that causes other people to stumble" - it says clearly that if you LOVE others, for real... there is only light in you and you are not going to be the cause of others stumbling.

this word, stumbling is the Greek word skandalon - and this is what it means: "the stick in a trap"

its the thing that will cause someone else to get trapped.

I want you to think about the way that we do this to other people, and the way that we set ourselves for disasters in our own lives by the traps that we set for ourselves...

We try and take as much time as needed, as often as possible here to talk about how important it is to forgive one another. Remember, forgiveness is the word *aphiēmi* (pronounced: ä-fē'-ā-mē) - "to send away" - it means that what someone else did to you is not here anymore. There is no space for whatever that is, in your life, in your home... in our church. It was wrong, but its over, and now it needs to be sent away so that we can continue to be the loving Jesus community we were created to be.

it may seem redundant and repetitive, but if you don't forgive other people... what happens is subtle, usually SMALL things that are usually done by people not even realizing that they are doing them can cause what the writer of Hebrews calls "a root of bitterness" to grow in your life. And it can be extremely contagious.

So if someone hurts you, and you don't forgive that person and you continue coming back to it, before long, the pain that you feel toward that person will become a normal part of your life and the things that you are carrying, which will mean that before long it will become a normal part of your conversations.

And so then this is what happens... you will say something about someone, and you may not even realize what you are saying... or how you are framing that person in that moment, but what you are actually doing is using your words as the stick in the trap for the person that you are talking to... its a trap that will lead to THEM sinning by recreating the view of another human being based on what you told them.

our words create worlds. They paint images for people. And if your words are the ONLY picture that a person has of someone else, your words have the power to influence someones entire view of another person.

Let me give you an example... and I hate that this happened even though you may think this is not a big deal at all. Or maybe you will be like "I CANT BELIEVE A PASTOR SAID THAT"

It happens sometimes where I say something that I immediately regret... but the moment that I say it, the first thought that comes to my mind is this:

"what type of world is this going to create?" Because I understand that happens.

So this Thursday we went to this Pastors Think Lab, we took some of the people who help us during the days to this event, and we all went to lunch and we were with a bunch of youth leaders from another church and Drew mentioned to one youth pastor that they should come and bring a mission trip to Courage... trying to get the word out... and then a girl from ANOTHER church said "we keep telling our youth pastor to go to 4 days but they said no" and then I said this, and it was stupid... and I said it laughing to try and make it be okay but I said "what a bum!"

Then INSTANTLY I stopped... and I apologized. I said, "I should not have said it... I was totally kidding but I don't feel that way at all about him, I just would love for you guys to bring a team sometime."

and most people know the difference between a joke and something that is said in anger or bitterness... and I am not angry or bitter and I don't actually feel that way about this person that I don't know at all... But there are roots to comments like that, and roots rear their ugly head... in this instance it had everything to do with me and nothing to do with person I said that about: I do really want them to come... because I do really want our missions season to take off... I want them to experience Detroit and what God is doing here, and I do really want churches from all over to partner with us, and to see what God is doing here, and to be a part of it in one way or another.

But the problem is, it is very easy to want OUR THING to be EVERYONE'S THING... and the absolute truth is that God is moving all over the place, and it is NOT my job to decide what is best for someone else's students this summer... it is their job. They are the shepherd who was entrusted to those people...

and it can be easy to let disappointment guide us... and its easy to, in the traps of our minds, start to think that those people aren't for us... and they aren't with us, and they don't believe in us... BUT THAT IS SIMPLY NOT TRUE.

but here is what words have the potential to do... and this is why I right away apologized and emphasized how wrong it was to say...

what IF that person heard that, and agreed... they already said that they were frustrated about not being able to come... and now they get this subtle thought from another pastor saying "their pastor is a bum" and even though I meant absolutely nothing by it, if taken literally, it could have been taken as "our pastor doesn't do the work that is needed to be done"

and what it has the potential to do is to slowly start tearing down trust for the person that GOD TRUSTED TO LEAD THEM.

Words matter... they pave paths, they create worlds, and Jesus says that every careless word you say will be held against you. He says that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks... so the mouth is a reflection of what is going on inside of you. (Matthew 12:34-37)

Proverbs (29:11) says that “only a fool speaks whatever comes to his mind, where as a wise man quietly holds back”

the ESV puts it like this: a fool GIVES FULL VENT to his spirit...

and I think that is something we all need to remember... the things that we say... the way that we react... THE WAY THAT WE VENT... it all creates worlds... and what John says is that it sets traps... it sets people up to SIN. Your words can cause people to hold grudges against OTHER people, and pick up YOUR OFFENSE.

and sidebar: if you are on the receiving end of a conversation like that... DON'T EVER PICK UP SOMEONE ELSE'S OFFENSE. Walk them through it, but don't feed it, and definitely don't eat of it.

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This is why it is so important that you don't HATE your neighbor. That you don't hate your brother... this is why it is so important that we forgive every time:

Because what doesn't get sent away, will eventually come out... and if it comes out to someone else... then what happens? you tell someone “so and so slept with this person... or so and so used me in this way and BE CAREFUL OF SO AND SO” then the moment THEY meet “so and so” or the next time they see them... WHAT IS GOING TO BE THE FIRST THING THAT THEY THINK OF THEM?

THEY ARE A CHEATER.

THEY ARE A THEIF.

THEY LIE ABOUT PEOPLE. THEY USE PEOPLE. THEY ARE FAKE.

THEY ARE GOING TO LET YOU DOWN!

whatever it is. Its the first thing they will think of... all critical, sinful thoughts toward forgiven children of God whom He loves with all of his heart.

Proverbs 17:9 says “whoever covers an offense seeks love (what we are all trying to achieve... LOVE... how do you get there? you cover offenses. You don't live in them, you send them away...), but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.”

You are setting traps for people when you talk to them about others who you are holding something against.

and if you are the HEARER in that conversation: you will have to actually work to create a different image of them than the one that was painted by someone else... and now suddenly people are on proving ground with us and they don't even know it.

Do you see the problem with that?

when we should look at broken people, and if we are honest with ourselves, realize that what we are seeing is a reflection of ourselves...

A PERSON WHO IS BROKEN... BUT WHO HAS AN ADVOCATE.

and because John understands that, and because John obviously UNDERSTANDS THE POWER OF WORDS... what he does is HE SHOWS US a better way... and he uses HIS WORDS to build up the church and affirm them and remind them of all of the things that they already ARE... and its actually one of the most powerful things in the entire Bible.

He says: I am NOT writing to you because you are BAD... I am writing to you, BECAUSE YOU ARE FORGIVEN. I am writing to you, BECAUSE because you KNOW God... I am NOT writing to you because of all the times that you fell... because when you fall, I know you have an advocate...

I AM writing you BECAUSE YOU ARE STRONG! BECAUSE GOD LIVES IN YOU, AND BECAUSE YOU... HAVE... OVERCOME THE EVIL ONE.

I absolutely love the arc of this chapter... I love the way that he starts in verse 1 and 2 with Jesus... John tells us, that we shouldn't sin... but he knows that its not as simple as that, because we will sin.

So he says that when we DO sin, the most important thing to remember is that we do indeed have an advocate... someone who will plead our cause... someone who knows we are guilty BUT WHO HAS ALREADY TAKEN CARE OF THE PUNISHMENT...

then John goes on to say that if God's love truly is in us, then we will keep the commandments, and Jesus sums up all of the commandments with this simple phrase... Love God, and Love your neighbor...

Then John continues on that path, saying why we must not hate our brother... and how its impossible to love God if you hate your brother... he says hate actually BLINDS YOU... it keeps you in darkness...

that is why you can "say" you love God while you still hate your neighbor... because you are blind... you are walking in a lie, you are walking in darkness.

a darkness that there is no path out of BESIDES FORGIVENESS.

But then he shifts it, and he gives us this, sort of, poetic piece in which he declares who we are.

and we are going to close the sermon by reading it...

But before we read it, I want you to know why I think this section is so important... why I believe that this SHOULD CHANGE YOU... :

I know that there are people in this place who have been having a hard time forgiving others... I KNOW that I PERSONALLY have had a hard time with forgiving others.

and honestly, the only way you will ever be able to do it... the only way you will ever truly be able to move on, the only way you will be able to “send away” that offense that you are holding toward someone, is if you take it to the cross. If you look to the God who hung on that tree SO THAT YOU COULD BE FORGIVEN.

Jesus tells a parable about a man who was forgiven a debt that he could never have repaid... but then that same man turned around and had someone who owed him just a little money thrown in prison for it...

and the idea of that seems totally absurd, until you find yourself struggling to forgive someone. Its hard. Its very hard.

and the point of that parable is that... no matter how awful it may be, what someone else may have done to you... the depth of pain they have caused you, the things that they may have stolen from you...

it is a small debt in comparison TO WHAT WE DID TO JESUS. And yet what did he do with our sins? He sent them away... he forgave them... he died for them. Nothing else will help you forgive another person, especially when the pain is so real.... besides that.

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and I also know that there are people here who have been having a hard time forgiving themselves... ACCEPTING FORGIVENESS THEMSELVES.

Accepting what Jesus has done for them.

The truth is, the fact that you are forgiven IS LITERALLY THE TRUEST THING ABOUT YOU.

The fact that Jesus loves you, and PAID FOR YOUR SINS SO THAT YOU DO NOT HAVE TO LIVE IN THEM ANYMORE IS THE TRUEST THING ABOUT YOU...

we talked about truth last week... and how there is truth. And I am telling you... I am PROMISING YOU... there is no greater truth than the truth that you and I have sinned... but that you and I have an advocate... someone who knows our guilt, yet already took care of.

That is the truth. Its absolutely true. And it absolutely applies to you!

but sometimes, even though things are true, they don't always feel real.

I read an article yesterday morning about a man and his brother who lived far from their Father, and they knew that their Father did not have much time to live... and they wanted him to give them a final blessing before he died...

The Father had spent his whole life affirming them, loving them, encouraging them, so that didn't seem like too much to ask because that was the tone that he had set their entire life... that of blessing with his words. So they got him on a three way phone call, but instead of giving them a final blessing, he just kept insisting that he would live until he was 100, so he didn't give them what they were looking for.

As they ended the call, the last thing that he said to them ended up being the last words he would ever speak to his sons, and he said this:

“You're my beautiful soldiers.”

Hardly the blessing that they had requested, but encouraging none the less.

and then this is what the article said, and I will just read a couple sections of it for you:

“What we didn't realize was that Dad wasn't finished. He had one more affirmation left.

Two days after Dad died, my aunt gave us a notebook that belonged to him, and what we found inside took our breath away.

Dad had hand-written seven pages of individual blessings for my brother and me, our wives, and his seven grandchildren.

Affirmation after affirmation filled the pages until at the end, he pronounced this final blessing over all of us: "Above all, I praise and thank a loving God who hasn't and never will forget about me or you. You will never lose your significance to the Lord."

Woven into that message was the thing we all needed to hear from Dad one more time: "You will never lose your significance to me." I knew that – of course I knew that – but I never stopped needing to hear it."

The article went on to encourage the readers by saying:

"Our loved ones don't necessarily assume we love them deeply, and **even if they do**, it means everything just to hear it. It doesn't take seven pages or eloquent words to make the point either.

"I love you."

"You matter to me."

"I'm so glad you're in my life."

Imagine what it would mean for you to hear those words from your father, mother, spouse, child or a friend. Imagine what it might mean if you gave those words as a gift to someone else."

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if you are struggling with bitterness this morning... give yourself to affirmation... to finding something beautiful in others... because it is there. And your words could create a whole new world of hope for you... one not defined by the things that others did to you, but what Jesus did for you... grace is the greatest gift you've received, and its the greatest gift you can give.

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if you are struggling with acceptance this morning, let the words we are about to read from the Apostle John reaffirm and remind me you just where you stand with Jesus.

You can live your whole life, and something be true the whole time... and you know that its true, but you still need to hear it... You still need to be reminded... That Father spent his whole life blessing his children, yet in the end what they wanted most was a reminder of that blessing.

The truth was always there... but they needed it to take shape one more time... and for a moment they were so disappointed that they didn't get that final affirmation. But whether they would have got that final journal or not, IT WOULD NOT HAVE CHANGED THE LOVE THAT THAT FATHER HAD FOR HIS CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES.

and a lot of us live that way with God. Even though we know that HOW MUCH HE loves us is the truest thing about us... sometimes it doesn't feel real.

and its not that its not real... its that circumstances sometimes take control of our emotions and we forget who we are in Christ, because in the same way that we have an advocate, we also have an adversary. A Devil who works night and day to remind us of the past that Jesus died for... and trying to convince us that we still have to die for it.

But its a lie. And there is an enormous journal written to remind you just how much you are worth to Jesus. And in it, do you remember what we said at the very beginning? John says that you are STRONG. (ischyros) (pronounced ē-skhü-ro's) literally meaning "of one who has strength of soul to sustain the attacks of Satan"

You can do it!

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but I know that life just hits hard sometimes... and days don't always go the way that we had hoped that they would... and sometimes will find ourselves at the end of the day realizing "this could have gone better..." or even "I could have done better"

and if there is one thing that I think we can learn from the way that John ends this section in this poetic affirmation, it is that we all need reminders sometimes, of just who it is that we are. Because we are not lost people... we are redeemed people.

we are not orphans... we are sons and daughters of the living God.

and it was on our worst day that Jesus died for us. On a cross. So that he could send our sins away and never bring them back up again.

Jesus sent them away... so why are we still grasping onto them?

so lets read this together:

I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.

I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.
you know who is from the beginning.
you have overcome the evil one.
you know the Father.

you know him who is from the beginning.

You are strong.

God lives in you.

you have overcome the evil one.

That is the world that Jesus DIED to create for you.