



## **Letters of Love**

**#12 God is Love**

**June 24, 2018**

**Courage Church, Detroit, MI**

**scriptures:** 1 John 4:7-12, 1 Thessalonians 3:12, Luke 9:51-56, John 19:28, 1 John 3:1, Matthew 24:12, John 8:1-11, 1 John 2:1, John 8:12-18.

Today's message continues through the Apostle John's description of God's character and what exactly that means to us.

What you know about God, think about God, and BELIEVE ABOUT GOD will have an enormous impact on the type of person that you are and the type of life that you live. As Christ's body here on earth, IF we believe God is a certain way, we will begin to reflect that way. If we believe God is angry... we are going to become more and more angry.

if we believe that God loves one group of people and hates another, we will begin to do the same. So it is crucial that we get right the things that we know about God... because if we truly love Him and seek to serve Him... then those are the things that will begin to shape our character.

What we believe God to be like will affect every part of our lives. And it should. It will affect how we react to the stories we hear. If you are a Christian, you will react to EVERY SITUATION, no matter what it may be, in the way that you believe God would have you to act... so the way that you respond says a lot about what you believe that God is like...

And its always been that way, which is why John is SO INTENTIONAL HERE to paint a very clear picture for us of WHAT GOD IS LIKE.

In chapter one, John says: God is Light... Which is powerful. YOU CAN NOT OVERCOME DARKNESS WITH ANYTHING BUT LIGHT, but darkness is powerless against light. Light wins every time it shows up.

In chapter two, John tells us that Jesus is our ADVOCATE. Our *paraklētos*. There are two definitions to this word... One is “called to ones side” and the other is “one who pleads *another’s cause* before a judge”

In chapter three, John focuses on God as our Father... explaining that God’s seed abides IN US, and what that means for us.

And today, half way through chapter 4, we come to probably the most famous, and considered by many to be the MOST important characteristic of God. and that is love.

We will read in a few moments these words: God is Love.

There could not be a more simple, yet loaded description of who God is, and what He is like. And personally, for me, whenever I am faced with a hard decision... a decision about how to handle something that I don’t know how to handle... I try my best to come back to this verse... God is love...

am I reflecting this crucial, beautiful aspect of God in how I handle everything that comes at me?

lets read together.

1 John 4:7-12

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 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. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”

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Today I am *not* going to just go line by line... I AM going to try and paint the bigger picture of this passage by going elsewhere in the Bible and returning periodically to it in order to more clearly define just how some of this can look in our lives and in our world today.

For starters, John says that anyone who does not love does not know God.

Which is an incredibly bold statement.

We have talked a lot about knowing God... God himself defines what it means to know him in Jeremiah 22:16 by saying that knowing God means you “plead the cause of the poor and the needy. That is what it means to know me declares the Lord.”

John echo’s that here.

Whoever Loves others... knows God.

But most Christian’s, especially when they FIRST get saved, get this idea in their head that knowing God means making all the right decisions...

rejecting the things that you want to be doing... and those are good things to work on, we should strive to live moral lives and it does please God and it does reflect the fact that God’s love is transforming us... but those things aren’t what it means to know God.

Jesus himself in Matthew 9 says “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” - in other words: I am MORE interested in the way that you treat other people, than I am in the things that you give up.

Mercy means that you view the world from the perspective of another person’s needs... you put yourself in *their* place and ask “if this were me, what outcome would I want to see here?” It can be defined as “active compassion” - it is letting yourself “feel” for another person... and then being sprung to action by what you feel.

Merciful people are people of action. They are people who raise their voices when necessary. They are people who aren't afraid of what it will cost them, but rather what it could mean for the other person.

And the reason that I believe that understanding mercy is important, before we try and understand the type of love that John seems to be describing, is because love is an action, and it is something that you have got to be moved TOWARD.

The way John describes love is that it is something that Jesus *did*... Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice BY WAY OF MERCY... He gave us exactly what WE NEEDED, no matter what it cost Him.

But at the same time, He also shows us how we aren't even capable of loving at the level of how much God loves us.

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We can never, EVER pay God back for what He did for us by loving Him back... because our love for Him will never be at the level that He loves us. But He does tell us that we can reflect His love for us, in the way that we love one another.

and some of us may hear this and think "I am just so far from being there! My life is not what it should be... I know that I don't love people the way that I should be loving people..."

hear me on this... In 1 Thessalonians 3:12 Paul writes "may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you" - your love should be constantly increasing.... expanding... growing.

we should be working toward finding new ways that we take care of each other, and love our neighbors, and be generous toward the people in our community...

but just like we said a few weeks ago... who we are NOW is not who we will be when the journey is over. Life is a process... and Love is a process.

Its important to understand something about the Apostle John:

Because when we read this letter, it is very obvious that this is a guy who understands love. The letter is filled with some of the most love centric scriptures in the entire Bible, and this passage in particular is the heart and center of the entire thing.

This letter was definitely written near the end of John's life... it is the culmination of an entire life lived... John spent just a couple of years following Jesus and studying and learning at the feet of Jesus, and then had a lifetime to process what he had learned as he continued into more ministry after Jesus resurrected.

This is the guy who history records as, at the end of his life being carried into churches to preach and giving five worded sermons... "little children, love one another!" - and when he was questioned about why that is the only thing he ever says anymore, he answered: "that is the Lord's Commandment. If you do that, it is sufficient."

This is a guy who certainly thinks that there is nothing more important than love.

But if you turn your Bibles back to Luke 9:51-56, you read about a very different John. A younger, more brash, less gracious John. In this passage, Jesus sent messengers ahead of Him into a Samaritan Village so that the village could prepare the way for Jesus to arrive... but the village rejected Jesus. They did not want Him to come.

And this is how a much younger John and his brother James both respond to this village rejecting Jesus... they say "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

Like... Jesus, all of those people deserve to die for rejecting you, do you want me to summon some fire to consume them?

seriously. How dark is that?

And the Bible simply tells us that Jesus rebuked them for saying this... He denied their suggestion and rebuked the fact that it even came out of their mouths.

But can you imagine what Jesus must have been thinking when he heard that?

Like, did you really just say that all of the people who we were trying to go and bring a message of hope to... that fire should consume them? Like, that is the opposite of why we wanted to go there!!!

But John grew. He began to understand it all much more clearly.

And in the end, he was the only disciple that stayed at the cross with Jesus... he wasn't hanging with Him, but he was there for Him. And after Jesus died, John actually took Mary, the mother of Jesus into his own home and cared for her as his mother. (John 19:26-27)

and the reason I think that this matters to us right now, is because I think there is a certain comfort in knowing that for John, growing in love into who he eventually became was a lifelong process. The man writing this letter was very different than the man who wanted to call fire down on the Samaritans because they rejected Jesus.

BUT... this is a man who has come to terms with the fact that if he had only one word that he could choose to describe God, and it would forever be what his church knew God to be... the word that John would have chosen is without a doubt: LOVE.

But he had to learn it.

And that is not meant to be an excuse today for ignoring a need or for responding to brokenness, you learn by practice... But truthfully, love is something that you learn, it is not ONLY something that you feel.

But it is something that I believe we have to be aware of, and here is why:

Something that I have noticed in people as they get older, is they either become more selfish, or more loving.

You get more selfish, because the world is a cold place, and its not been very forgiving of you and so in turn you are not very forgiving of it.

You feel like it owes you something, and you are going to do everything you can to make sure that you get what is yours in the time that you have left.

In Matthew 24:12, Jesus, talking about the last days says this:

“because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.”

The further the world gets from the way we think that it should be - the harder it will be to love it. Because when you want to see something change and it doesn't change, your good intentions leave you disappointed, and that can really wear on you.

Discouragement can lead to bitterness if you let it.

and if that happens, the more that you see, and the older you get, will only lead you to getting more angry...

and you get more selfish...

But others actually go the opposite way, and get more loving...

because the world is a cold place... and it has not been very forgiving of you... so you know how much it hurts to be let down.

and the more that you have felt that, the more you have wanted something better for the next person. You know what was taken from you, because you have had a lifetime of things that were important to you be taken from you... and you want something better for your children... for the next person.

the same circumstances that have the potential to fuel anger can also be the fuel for mercy, generosity, grace and love.

you see the same brokenness... but you respond to it in an opposite way...

For me, I have certainly had times when I felt like I was getting more angry... but when I read the Bible I know how clear the case is, that it is love and love alone that will win the world.

and I see it so clearly... now I even read the same words of Jesus that I used to read... and the same stories of Jesus that I grew up hearing... but the older I get, the grace that is interwoven in these beautiful words stands out to me more and more.

PROBABLY, because I need it more and more and more...

And I read things thinking "how did I not see this before?"

and as I talk to other people who don't necessarily agree with me... and I show them the passages but they just don't see it the same way... I sit there like... "how? How could this mean anything but grace? How could this mean anything but love love love love love?"

and here is why I believe that happens... why some people resist the message of the unconditional love of God in the scriptures.

I believe that this phrase: "God is Love" - it stands in opposition to the religion that we have unknowingly created that says "God loves me because I \_\_\_\_\_"

God loves me because I read my Bible.  
God loves me because I go to church.  
God loves me because I fast and pray...

it was exactly what the Pharisees were saying... "God, look at all of the things that I can do to earn your acceptance..."

And look at all the things that I DON'T DO... like the Pharisee in Luke 18 who goes to pray and says "thank you that I am not like the adulterers or extortionists... or this tax collector who is standing in the distance.



God loves me because I am NOT like this tax collector.  
God loves me because I don't look at pornography.  
God loves me because I don't ever get drunk.

no. God loves you because God is Love. and he can't be anything else.  
Remember when John says that "God is light?" right after that it says "IN HIM IS NO DARKNESS AT ALL!" He can't be darkness.

He can't show up in a dark place and then NOT LIGHT IT UP.

He can't not Love you. He is your Father. 1 John 3:1 "See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should be called Children of God; and so we are!"

Even when Jesus talks about the Prodigal Son... He gives the most extreme example of a Son doing everything he could to push his Father away and let His Father down... and yet His Father ran and met him the moment that he saw his son coming home.

Because that is the love of a Father.

God is love.

So what does this look like in the flesh? You guys remember last week we talked about how Jesus put flesh and blood to Words... John 1:14, "the word became FLESH..."

because, "God is love" is a beautiful phrase, its lovely to say, but it is just words until you see it in action...

so lets put it in action.

There is this incredible story in John chapter 8 about a woman who is caught in the very act of adultery. MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE that I have found in the Bible, this passage truly puts FLESH AND BLOOD to the fact that God is love.

and when you see it in action, you realize that it explains everything. It gives us answers that we thought didn't even exist, to problems that we thought were unsolvable.

And the story goes like this... this woman is dragged INTO THE TEMPLE after being caught in the act of adultery... we like to imagine this setting taking place at a beach beside an ocean... but actually it takes place in the temple. Let that sink in... it would be like a bunch of us dragging an adulterer into the center of the church with stones in our hands ready to kill her right here in this place that so many consider to be sacred.

and she is taken to Jesus, and her accusers say to her "the law of Moses says that she should be stoned... what do you say?"

and what Jesus does MUST HAVE BEEN brilliant, even though we don't know exactly what it was He did... because he bends down and he begins to write something in the dirt... and then he gets up and says "let he who is without sin, cast the first stone."

First takeaway is this: the way of Jesus is a THIRD WAY...

Notice what the text says... it is very specific...

The leaders say to Jesus: THE LAW SAYS such a woman should be stoned...

This woman broke the law.

But Does Jesus break the law?

No.

Does Jesus follow the law?

No.

What Jesus does is He stands in opposition to what the letter of the law would have him to do, by standing next to the person that ultimately He

knew that He existed for. That He knew He would one day die for, because there was no way that she or anyone else could ever keep all of those laws... because you and I will always fall short of who we are supposed to be...

Second takeaway, in the next verse, after Jesus says “he who is without sin may cast the first stone” and He bends down and keeps writing in the sand, it says:

“when they heard it, they went away one by one, **beginning with the older ones**, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before Him.”

and I have thought about this line... beginning with the older ones... and to be honest it took me years to figure out why the older ones left first... and do you know what it took for me to figure it out?

it took me getting a little older.

it took me making a few more mistakes.

When I was younger, I was a lot like John. I thought, “its my way or the highway... I am a Christian, and I don’t do this and I don’t do that... and I go to church.” I thought it was so simple... like: “you just don’t do stuff like that... and you won’t get stoned for it.”

But that type of a mindset only works if you never look in the mirror.

It only works if you never read the rest of the laws... the ones that you have broken...

But the more life I lived, the more life I screwed up.

and the more life that I screwed up, the more that I realized: “Jacob, you are no better than anyone else.”

But Jesus was always there to meet me every time I fell. Grace always picked me back up again every time that I would fall.

and the idea that says that Jesus can meet me in my mess, but someone else deserves to be stoned for theirs...

there is just no reconciling that, if God's love truly lives in you.

But the thing that is so amazing about the love of God, is John says that no matter how much we love God, it will never be as much as he loves us... as much as we try and love other people like Jesus does... He will always be the most loving... But I want to implore you today, knowing that we are not Jesus... but knowing that Jesus IS OUR EXAMPLE...

and I think that picture of the woman caught in adultery is such a picture of this... what a display of love. What a display of meeting someone right where they are... not just being the guy who doesn't condemn... not just being the guy who doesn't throw a stone...

but being the guy who gets EVERYONE ELSE TO LAY DOWN THEIR STONES.

And this is so key... It all goes back to that fundamental verse in 1 John 2... John tells us, "little children, do not sin. But if you do sin, because you WILL SIN... you have an advocate in Jesus Christ the righteous."

You have a *paraklētos*.

Remember... there are two definitions to this word... One is "called to one's side" and the other is "one who pleads *another's cause* before a judge"

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and in this moment, Jesus was both. He stood by the side of the woman, and he plead her cause before a group of people who had already made their decision... they already had the stones in their hands... But notice, He didn't plead her cause by using her merits... because she was guilty.

He plead her cause by reminding everyone that the world is a broken place, and that to one degree or another, each person standing there holding a stone has contributed to its brokenness.

and do they really want to break it further, by heaping upon this woman the judgment of a law, that if applied to *their own* lives, they could just as easily find themselves standing there, surrounded by an angry mob.

And this is where I had to really pause this week.

Because it is one thing to lay down a stone... but its a different thing entirely to be able to effectively persuade everyone else to do the same...

The love that you have in your heart at this moment, matters greatly. It could be the thing that someone else needs the most, right now.

It could be what someone else needs to hear, to LAY DOWN THEIR STONES, today.

The mercy you feel... it matters. The way that you use your voice to speak up for others, it matters.

Love is the only thing that will change the world.

Love is the only thing that will bring justice, because it is the only thing that motivates the type of action that is needed to get there.

But in all things, remember that we represent that God who is Love.

Can you imagine if in the temple that day, if Jesus would have for even a moment agreed with Pharisees... if he had picked up a stone and thought, "yeah, she deserves this..." Now, we all know that that is the farthest thing from what Jesus would do... and yet some of us represent God as if that is what He is like.

When you can sit back, and make judgments about peoples lives based on one passage that you probably barely understand, or a circumstance that you probably don't know much about...

when right in front of you is a person who IF, for just one minute you could put yourself in her shoes...IF for just one minute you could empathize, not

knowing about her past... not knowing about what went on yesterday or the day before... not knowing any of the circumstances that lead to the one moment that is being highlighted right now...

if you can make that kind of judgment, your heart has grown cold. And if you are wondering... HOW DO I LEARN? How do I learn love? How do I learn empathy?

How do I empathize with a story about someone who has done something awful, that I have never done?

Here is where I would encourage you to start.

Go back to that moment in the temple... and ask yourself this question:

What did Jesus write in the ground?

Now you say, Pastor Jacob we don't know what He wrote in the ground... it is impossible to know... the Bible doesn't tell us... EXACTLY. and that is my point in asking yourself this question.

“what if we don't know what he wrote in the sand, because by not knowing, it leaves us to our imaginations, and allows us to ask ourselves this question: ‘what would I need for it to be? What would I need to see Jesus write in the sand that would convict me enough to lay down the stone if I was holding one...’ what would it be?”

What would it be for you? would it be a list of your sins? would it be all of your thoughts? Would it be the things that you haven't repented of?

or would it be a list of the things that that woman went through leading up to that fateful moment?

Would it turn your eyes toward yourself? or would it turn your empathy toward someone who went through something that maybe you never have done and don't understand?

We don't know what He wrote... because we weren't supposed to know that part, BUT WHAT I DO KNOW WITHOUT A SHADOW OF A DOUBT, is that WE HAVE GOT TO FIND A WAY TO LAY DOWN THESE STONES.

Listen, this is what happens right after this story in John 8. We almost always stop at verse 11, when Jesus says "go and sin no more."

But verse 12 says AGAIN JESUS SAID TO THEM:

"I am the light of the world" - watch this... again, He puts flesh and blood to the words that John uses to describe God... God is light... 1 John 1:5.

But the Pharisees respond to him, essentially saying: "you can't just say that about yourself, and we don't believe you!" and Jesus says "my testimony is true..." and this is so fascinating...

This time He actually uses their law against them. There is something known as "The Law of Evidence" which states that in order for someone to be convicted of a crime, it has to have been witnessed.. physically SEEN, by TWO WITNESSES. Which actually makes the story of the adulterous woman even more corrupt... because if they were really ready to stone her, that meant that two people BOTH SAW IT HAPPEN...

But Jesus turns it on them here and says that God the Father bears witness of Jesus, so He does merely bear witness about Himself. There are two... but then Jesus says this, and it is ABSOLUTELY HUGE:

He says "you judge according to the flesh..." right? Just like the woman that you were ready to stone five minutes ago...

and we would expect that Jesus would follow that up by saying something like "I judge the heart... or I judge the bigger picture... or I judge what is really going on..."

but do you know what Jesus says?

"I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge by I and the Father who sent me." (John 8:16) -

Jesus says “I and the Father CAN judge... we are the only ones who can, and yet I still don’t!” And when we one day are judged... its going to be by the same Jesus who died for you because of how much He loves you... and God the Father which the Bible says YOU ARE THE SEED OF!!!

Jesus tells them “you judge without any basis or way of knowing what is going on in the depths of peoples hearts... you don’t know, but you are quick to rule someone else out... But Jesus sees the depths of our hearts, and yet still chooses to not judge.

Because God is Love. Even when you have sinned.  
God is Love, even when a law has been broken.  
God is Love, even when we are not loving.

and for me this week, to realize that God is love even in the most corrupt societies, and that God has always been love... even through the most destructive times in history...

it just refueled my heart to love people even more in the moments when it feels like the whole world is falling apart.

when love has grown cold... God just kept being love... and if His people would could grasp it, we would change the whole world.

seriously...

if Christians aren’t making the world a better place for people, then what are we doing here at all?