



Letters of Love

#8 Grace or Guilt?

May 27, 2018

Courage Church, Detroit, MI.

scriptures: 1 John 2:28-29, 1 John 3:1-10, Romans 6:1-2, Luke 15:11-32

We have been on the letters of the Apostle John since Easter, and we will continue through them probably until right around the end of summer, early to mid August we should be closing them out.

today's message will be where we turn a chapter... we will read the last two verses of chapter 2, and then move into chapter 3 finally. I think we are about half way through our series on these letters. The more I study it, the more it seems to be getting spread out further and further but one that I know for sure, more clearly than ever is this:

you could spend your whole life studying the whole Bible and still never get even close to having studied it all... we could take this passage and could open it up for people to come in during the week and we could teach seven sermons on it between now and next Sunday, and there still be things we missed. In fact we were in the office this week and I was bouncing some things from the passage off of Chris, and the first thing that Chris said when he read the passage we are on was: "THATS A WHOLE SERIES." - its like that with a lot of these passages.

so more and more I am realizing how important it is to be prayerful and mindful in the studying of these passages, to figure out first and foremost what God wants to do in our lives and in our community through it right here and right now.

Our time together is just so limited, and so my goal most of the time in these teachings is to be a conduit for the Holy Spirit to deposit something into you that you need for your life today, out of the ancient letter that we are reading, that a pastor wrote to his church.

There will be lots of things that we will miss. There will be lots of perspectives WE COULD HAVE TAKEN... its like that old saying "God spoke, and the rest is commentary" - and so a lot of what we do here on a Sunday morning IS MEANT to be conversation STARTERS... not necessarily just a bunch of conclusions about the scriptures.

So here we go, lets open together to 1 John 2:28-29, and we will read through 1 John 3:10 - and I know you guys always pay attention... but FOLLOW ALONG with this... seriously... read every word being said here... and I will ask you a question for you to answer in your heads about this, in a few minutes.

"And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who **practices** righteousness has been born of him."

(now, what you will see happens next is John INTERRUPTS this thought... the thought here is that IF you practice righteousness, that is evidence that you have been born of him... and in verse 4 of chapter 3 John will pick back up on this thought... on the reality that a transformed life will bear fruit. But he first interrupts it with this amazing section about how much God loves us, that he would call us his children.

What we are about to read is hugely empowering:

chapter 3):

3 "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and **what we will be has not yet appeared**; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."

(Now, John returns to the original thought... the one that says that everyone who actually PRACTICES righteousness is born of God. But on the contrary, verse 4-10:)

“Everyone who makes a **practice** of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”

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On Thursday nights this Spring, Dawn and Chris lead us through a book called “Streams of Living Water” - and we focused on the streams of Spiritual Discipline and those of us who were there really got a lot out of it... there would be teaching... there would be time to ask questions and have dialogues, and then we would always have one or more specific things that we would do to “practice” - we would practice prophesying over each other... we would take personality tests and figure out where we land... what tradition we most fall in line with, and then we would practice that, and see how it fits to our lives.

It was just a very practical approach to the Spiritual Disciplines.

And one of those weeks we talked about and practiced something called the Incarnational Tradition, or “the Sacramental Life.” - and the idea is that we practice the presence of God in our every day tasks...

Finding God in our work... Worshipping God, while we work. In the Hebrew language, the word AVAD is a word that means “worship” and its the exact same word as the word for “work” - so in Hebrew, work and worship are literally the same word... because there was never supposed to be a

distinction between the two... work can just as much be worship... as singing a worship song can be.

so that night at Equip, the idea was seeing “what if we incorporated God even into the most basic tasks that we performed...” because the truth is, God is with us...

He is with us in the high moments, and the low moments... he is there when we are working... He is there when we are resting.

and what Chris had us do, just so that we could all do something together, was he had us color. He gave us these bookmarks, with this weirdo design on it, and a couple of crayons, and asked us to color them for like 20 minutes.

And for some people it was so painful to do... it was a bit awkward... one person actually described it to me as “agonizing” which I think is just awesome...

but everyone handled it a bit differently... everyone did something a bit different with their bookmark.

some people filled it in more broadly...

for me, I picked up one color, and filled in one or two tiny little lines, then I set the crayon down, and picked up another, and just colored a couple of tiny little lines throughout it... then I set down that crayon, grabbed another... then I did it all again and again...

so it moved pretty slowly for me. And after about 20 minutes we all stopped and gathered together to recap, but I wasn't even close to being done with my bookmark, so I was a bit frustrated... and Chris asked us to look at what we had done, and pray on it and think on it and see if there is anything that God may be subtly saying to us through this simple act of how we chose to draw on a book mark.

Again, this was an exercise showing about how God is in everything.

and everyone was sharing their thoughts... things they felt, all that stuff. And it was all uplifting and empowering stuff...

And when it got to me, I looked at this thing, so incredibly incomplete... so so far from having all the lines filled in... and as dumb as it may sound, for me the first thing that I felt was... guilt.

I felt guilty... and what I said when Chris asked if I felt like there was anything I could learn from that moment, or anything that perhaps I was feeling or hearing in that moment... I said something like "I tried to do too much."

I tried to fill in every little line and probably didn't get through even 10 percent of it. And right away, my mind just GOT FILLED with all of the things that I have going that are not finished... all of the things we are going after... The dreams we share with each other and with all of you... and it almost felt like they were getting squashed... like this reality that was saying "look around... you cast a big dream but its not happening... you are trying to do too much" - in fact I think thats what I responded by saying...

"I'm trying to do too much." -

and I know that that was NOT the point of doing that particular practice, it was meant to affirm you, and to remind us that everything is Spiritual and Moses saw God in a fire, but for Elijah it was in a LOW WHISPER (1 Kings 19:12) - but the point was that God IS WITH US... and yet as I looked at this thing, I didn't feel God. I felt guilt.

so I wasn't sure what to do with that.

and I put the bookmark in my Bible, and I left it there... its there right now... in fact I have been using it as the bookmark to find my place in 1 John this week...

and every time I saw it I thought about it... and I wondered "God... is there anything else here?" "Is there something else that I can get out of this?"



BECAUSE I FEEL LIKE I AM DOING WHAT I AM SUPPOSED TO BE DOING.

It didn't help that when I was at home putting Brooklyn to bed, she showed me this picture that she had just colored in:



But you know, that night at Equip I listened to Dawn and what she said about her drawing... and I listened to Drew about he he said about his... and what Ella and Foster said about theirs...

and it seemed like for everyone else... it was a positive message. For everyone else, it was... grace. But for me it was guilt.

Now... as I was reading our scripture this morning... as you were listening carefully to me read, or you were reading along...

IT IS VERY POSSIBLE, and in fact likely, that many of you, felt guilt.

and it is also very possible, and in fact likely, that others of you... felt grace.

John is very specific about the issue of sin in this passage and he is very specific to point out that a person who practices sin, that is... makes a lifestyle of it... continues in it... chooses that as their way of life... that they are NOT of God, but are actually of the Devil.

But yet at the same time, its absolutely filled with one of the most beautiful images of grace in the entire Bible, saying "oh my gosh, can you even begin to see how amazing this love is that God our Father HAS FOR US... that even as broken as we are... He would still call us His children?"

Do you read grace?
Or do you read guilt?

and IF you read grace, do you feel guilty about that?

and what I mean by that is this... I have talked to A LOT of people in my life, who for them... this is their struggle: they don't believe that they *deserve* the grace of God.

And they DON'T! I tell them every time... You don't deserve it. I don't deserve it... but that is what makes it grace.

But the problem is, that because they don't believe that they deserve it, they have a very difficult time accepting it. and this center section here in 1 John 3 is one of those verses that they go to saying... "look... I still sin... this says that I am not of God. It says I have never seen God or KNOW GOD" — "so I read it and I am just *confused*..."

Which, that verse, quite frankly, IS a bit confusing because in 1 John 1 it says that IF WE SAY WE DON'T SIN, we make God a liar... so in one place it says "don't you dare say you don't sin..." in another it says "you better not sin!" - well... thats the way it looks at least, when we read it quickly.

The key to contrasting these passages, I believe is obvious.

It would be arrogant and would belittle the gospel to say that we do not sin... it would be calling God a liar... because He sent his Son to die for us BECAUSE WE SIN... but the word that John seems to really highlight in these verses we are on today is the word "practice"

verse 4 - Everyone who makes a **practice** of sinning also practices lawlessness;

verse 8 - whoever makes a PRACTICE of sinning is of the devil...

verse 10 - whoever does not PRACTICE righteousness is not of God.

1 John 3 is saying that if we fall into a life of deliberate sin, choosing to spend our time practicing sin rather than righteousness... this is different than falling... its different than making a mistake... its different than SINNING. What this is talking about is continuing to walk in, practice... EVEN JUSTIFY SIN... it is to live as if your sin didn't cost anything so there is no harm in continuing in it...

PRACTICE OF SIN.

Grace is not a reason to sin.

Grace is not an excuse to sin.

attached to your sins comes is the highest price tag imaginable... A price that you SIMPLY CAN NOT PAY... and so just like 1 John 2 says... when you do sin... just know this... you have an advocate...

now, that is CLEARLY NOT SAYING... when you choose to ignore the teachings of Jesus and throw out the way of Jesus and stop loving people like Jesus loved them... and not even try to live a life pleasing to Him...

WHAT IT IS saying is that when you cling to the cross... though you fall.... JESUS WILL PICK YOU BACK UP.

This passage gives us a clear understanding that if you think that you can use grace as a pass to keep on sinning then you don't understand grace at all.

Paul says this in Romans 6:1-2

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

Now, this is the same guy who just a chapter later says: “I keep doing the things that I hate... I don't want to be doing them yet I keep doing them!” so Paul gets it... people fall...

people slip...

people make messes of their lives...

but there is a difference between a person who accepts the love and the grace of Jesus... that He would be willing to step into our broken world and give us hope...

and a person who thinks that Jesus is just their get out of hell free card... a pass to live any way that they want.

And I believe that what John is saying to us here could be summarized like this...

THERE IS A WAY TO READ THIS AS GRACE, and NOT GUILT... AND STILL BE COMPLETELY CHANGED BY IT.

...a way to look at life after becoming a Christian without thinking "Great, now I have a million new rules that I have to spend my whole life trying to keep."

and I believe that John gives us the solution... the path to not living a life that practices sin... and its all found in IDENTITY.

Its important to understand who you are in Christ, because if you live your life believing that you are what you do, and that your worth is wrapped up in what you accomplish, then every time you succeed you will have pride and every time you fail you will be depressed...

We did 14 weeks last summer on Ephesians, and the entire book is about our identity in Christ... and the way we are transformed IN CHRIST... and how we are SAVED, BECAUSE OF CHRIST.

That is what John is getting at here... Its an identity. Your identity, according to John, is not a sinner even though you will sin sometimes... your identity is not a writer (even if you write) - its not a preacher (even if you preach) its not a lumberjack (even if you are a lumberjack like Spencer, who has been

gone the last couple of months because he had to go lumber jacking) - John says your identity is that YOU ARE A CHILD OF THE LIVING GOD.

Your identity is found in that you are a part of the family. Which in those days had even more significance than it does in our world today.

Your story was wrapped up in your families story... there wasn't such thing as a person who was successful while the rest of their family was still poor and broke and hurting... that person would be considered a failure, not a success. Family was everything.

Now, look again at verse 1:

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. **The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.**

maybe this has happened in your own life and your own family... people often judge the son by the Father... or by the people connected to them by blood...

The thought is, when you meet someone... “this person will likely, at least to a degree, be a reflection of the person that I already know, who they are related to... For example, I have told you before, as cheesy as it is that my parents helped set up Dawn and I... I give them 5% of the credit, and I give myspace the other 95.

(it is more fun to say we were a myspace couple than to say “my parents set us up” - we first met on myspace)

Dawn's sister and her husband worked with my parents, and my parents had a great deal of love for this couple and for Dawn's sister... and so when they found out that she had a sister who was available (Dawn), they right away thought “Jacob you need to meet her” - it was a positive experience that caused them to make a *positive* judgment on that family, not even knowing Dawn. And it worked out.

In the same way... people who know my Dad and were familiar with his ministry, automatically credit me as likely be good at what I do, because my Dad was such a good pastor. They won't come hear me teach because we are in Detroit and they are terrified... but the assumption is that we are doing a good job, AND IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH ME AT ALL.

On the contrary, growing up I would see teachers in school who would treat someone in the class less graciously because their brother two years before gave the teacher such a hard time.

and in a world that is hostile to God, we can't be surprised when they are hostile to us too. Because we belong to God. And I love that he throws that in there... reminding us that the entire journey is not going to be all butterflies and roses... but that any trouble we may experience will at best be a FAINT reflection of what Jesus actually went through...

but then he diverts RIGHT BACK TO THE BLESSINGS, and to what is to come... because it is worth it.

Its worth it that the world may be cold to you sometimes, because the benefits are greater than anything that anyone could ever take away from you... Because when you truly are a Son... you are in the family... you stay a son...

When Jesus told the parable of the prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), it didn't matter WHAT that boy did wrong... squandering the money... giving over to a life of sin... making his Father and his whole house look stupid...

the moment that boy wanted to come home...

The Father welcomed Him, like a Son. He threw him a party, because the Son that he wasn't sure he would ever see again, indeed came home. And he DIDN'T make him a slave, even though the son thought that he would... just like we often think that God will do to us when we come back to Him...

we think He will make us pay for the mistakes that we made by taking a lower place in His house.

but John says “you are a child of God” - that's who you are, you are born into the family... you have ALL the rights of a son... you are a son...

Verse 9 reminds us that God's Seed abides in us.

And IF that is your identity... God is your Father... IF the GOD OF THE UNIVERSE TRULY IS YOUR FATHER... you are not going to WANT TO SIN... because you will want to make your Father proud.

This is not a distant Dad... it's not a deadbeat dad who is never around...

This is the Father who is as close to you as the air that you breathe, who provides for you every step of the journey through your life... and who loves you so much that He would send Jesus to die for you... SO YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TO DIE...

and His seed abides in you.

and you cannot keep on with a life of sin.

Because you have been born of God.

Wherever you find yourself today... maybe you feel guilty for the things that you have done...

God loves you so much that He will meet you there today...

maybe you think that God would never take you back after what you did...

But just like the parable of the Prodigal Son, which Jesus told us TO DESCRIBE JUST HOW DEEP THE FATHER'S LOVE FOR US GOES...

God is waiting for you...

Don't read it as guilt...

Read it as grace. Grace that will meet you in your guilt... that will wash your sins white as snow...

its not guilt.

its *grace*.

its enough grace to get me to tomorrow... where more grace will be waiting to meet me, and carry me a little farther. And as I keep dreaming, and keep moving forward and keep working hard... I am constantly reminded of the reality of a seed... that a tree doesn't grow overnight. A baby doesn't grow up overnight...

You see here is the thing about a seed. And everybody knows this, sometimes we just need to remember it. A seed initially doesn't do much at all... what a seed represents is the POTENTIAL for something else to be created. And, when planted, if given the proper conditions, it becomes something new...

Take for instance, in our backyard we have this tree... and this is a tree that we DO NOT WANT THERE, but this should at least help you see my point... we have this tree that we cut down about two years ago now, because the roots were getting into our drain and backing the water up...



so we cut it down and have tried to kill it for like two years now already. But from this tree, and all the shake ups that happened when we cut it down, suddenly we started noticing SEVERAL new trees beginning to grow in our back yard... some we pulled up right away, others we didn't notice or pay much attention to.

Then, this Spring after the winter, we go out, and we see several of these small trees that are already in a place where we can't just pull them out...



if we want to stop them from eventually becoming enormous trees in the back yard, we are going to have to physically DIG THEM OUT NOW... they are growing

stronger.

and we were looking at these things, and asking each other... “when did this tree even get here? How did it get so big, and we didn’t even notice it?”

But a seed is a very powerful thing. And even if all you do is place it in the right conditions and leave it, IT WILL DO ITS THING.

and this is the way that this really just stuck out to me... chapter 3 begins by saying we are God’s children... automatically, his seed... the ones that come from Him...

but the very next thing John says, in verse 2 is this: WHAT WE WILL BE HAS NOT YET APPEARED.

and in my life, and in your life...

who we are going to be has not yet appeared... we are all journeying into who it is we will become... and the more we go, the more we learn... the more we grow... the closer we get...

if your journey doesn’t look the way that you thought that it would... IF YOUR LIFE DOESN’T LOOK THE WAY THAT YOU THOUGHT THAT IT WOULD...

remember that we are not who we will be...

But God’s seed abides in us... and I truly believe that if we seek Jesus and we love Jesus and we let ourselves be overtaken by the absolutely amazing grace of Jesus, we will become more and more like Him everyday.

And I have faith that tells me, one day we will look back on our lives, and all that God did through us, and we will ask ourselves the same question we asked about our trees: how did this get so big? How did we end up here? How did we end up okay?

How did I overcome THAT? How did we go from where we were, to where we are now?

Don't feel like you are condemned because you know that you fall short... all have fallen short.

Its the ones who think that they have arrived that I am worried about. The ones who think that they are exactly who they should be.. the ones who think they've earned something...

You didn't earn ANYTHING!

Jesus did it all. God loved us so much that he let it all happen... He SENT JESUS for it to happen... Because you and I are His children. And the Father's love for His children, it knows no limits.