Lawless Love

"JUDGE NOT" AND THE LAST DAYS CHURCH



KRISTA D SMITH

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"Freely you have received; freely give" Matthew 10:8

What Denomination Is This?

This book is not written from within any single denomination, nor does it advocate for one Christian tradition over another. It is written from a biblical view, grounded in the full counsel of Scripture, the entire Word of God. It reflects a neutral Christian approach, rooted in the historic confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

He is the Word who put on flesh and dwelt among us, sent to reconcile His people to God. He was crucified to pay the penalty for sin as the spotless Lamb of God, perfect in all His ways, our substitute on the cross. On the third day, according to the Scriptures, and according to the witness accounts recorded in both history and Scripture, He rose from the grave.

No one comes to the Father except through the Son. We are justified, made right before God, only and singularly by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. From there, Scripture commands us to be sanctified by the Word of God, a lifelong process of abiding in Him and allowing Him to change the way we think until it aligns with His Word.

We have no righteousness of our own. We are holy only because of our right standing in Christ, made possible through repentance and through trusting God to be our atonement through Christ alone. And we are called, as in Matthew 28, to make disciples, teaching them to do all that Jesus commanded, reassured that he who remains and endures to the end will be saved.

He who calls us is faithful.

PLEASE SHARE THIS MESSAGE WITH YOUR PASTOR, CHURCH FAMILY, OR SMALL GROUP

Contents

Introduction: A Love We Redefined

PART ONE: WHAT LOVE REALLY IS

1. “God Is Love,” But What Kind?
2. This Is the Love of God
3. “If You Love Me”
4. Not Burdensome

PART TWO: WHEN LOVE SAYS NO

5. The Love That Corrects
6. Grace Is Not a License
7. “This Is How God Made Me”

PART THREE: JUDGE NOT?

8. The Most Quoted Verse
9. Judge Righteous Judgment
10. By Their Fruits
11. Speaking the Truth in Love
12. “Peace, Peace,” When There Is No Peace
13. Itching Ears

PART FOUR: WALKING IT OUT

14. The Battle for Your Mind
15. Bad Company
16. Walking in the Love of God

Conclusion: The Love That Keeps
Seven Days: A Devotional for Returning to the Lord
Notes
About the Author

Introduction:

A Love We Redefined

“For this is the love of God, that we keep
His commandments. And His
commandments are not burdensome.”

{1 John 5:3}

Ask ten people on the street what the Bible says, and you will probably hear two answers more than any others. The first is “God is love.” The second is “Judge not.”

Both are in the Bible. Both are true. And both have been pulled so far out of their setting that most people who quote them would be surprised to read the verses around them.

That is why this book has been written.

We live in a time when love has been quietly redefined. In our culture, love means acceptance without conditions, approval without questions, and affirmation without correction. To love someone is to tell them they are fine just the way they are. To disagree with someone’s choices is to hate them. And the worst sin of all, the one sin our culture still believes in, is to tell someone else that what they are doing is wrong.

The church did not invent this definition of love. But in many places, we have adopted it. We have taken the world’s

idea of love, written “God” on the front of it, and called it the gospel.

The result is a God who loves everyone and expects nothing. A Jesus who welcomes everyone and changes no one. And a church that has learned to quote “Judge not” faster than it can quote any other verse in the Bible.

How John defined love

Here is something that surprised me when I first saw it. The Apostle John, who gave us the phrase “God is love” {1 John 4:8, 16}, did not leave us to guess what he meant by it. In the very same letter, only a few verses later, he told us exactly what the love of God looks like:

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. ***For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.*** *And His commandments are not burdensome.”* {1 John 5:2–3}

Read that slowly. John didn’t say, “This is the love of God, that we feel warmly toward Him.” He didn’t say, “This is the love of God, that we accept everyone.” He said, “This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.”

And then, as if he knew what we would say next, he added: “And His commandments are not burdensome.”

John was not a cold, rule-keeping man. He is the one who called himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved” {John 13:23}. He leaned on Jesus’ chest at the Last Supper. He stood at the foot of the cross when the others had run away {John 19:26}. And it was to John that Jesus, dying, entrusted the care of His own mother {John 19:27}. If

anyone in the New Testament understood the love of God, it was John.

And John said that love for God keeps His commandments.

Two words we have misunderstood

This book is about two ideas that have been bent out of shape.

The first is **love**. We have made God's love soft, shapeless, and undemanding. We've separated His love from His holiness, His love from His commandments, and His love from His correction. We've forgotten that the same Bible that says "God is love" also says, "For whom the LORD loves He chastens" {Hebrews 12:6}. We've forgotten that Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" {John 14:15}.

The second is **judgment**. We have taken Jesus' words, "Judge not, that you be not judged" {Matthew 7:1}, and turned them into a rule that no Christian may ever say that anything is wrong. But the same Jesus who said "Judge not" also said, "Judge with righteous judgment" {John 7:24}. In the same sermon, He told us to recognize false prophets by their fruits {Matthew 7:15–20}. The same Paul who warned against judging said, "Do you not judge those who are inside?" {1 Corinthians 5:12}.

These two misunderstandings are connected. Once love has been redefined as approval, then any kind of judgment, any word of correction, any call to obedience, starts to sound unloving. And once judgment has been forbidden, there is nothing left to stop love from becoming approval.

Each one protects the other. Together, they have produced a generation of sincere believers who think that obeying God is legalism and that warning someone is hatred.

A love without commandments is a counterfeit. It feels better. It asks less. And it is not the love of God.

Lawless love

When Jesus' disciples asked Him about the signs of His coming and the end of the age, He gave them a long list of warnings. Wars and rumors of wars. Famines and earthquakes. Persecution. And then He said something about the inside of the church that should make every one of us stop:

"Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. ***And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold****"* {Matthew 24:11–12}.

The word for "lawlessness" is *anomia*. It literally means "without law." It describes living as if God had never spoken: no standard above me, no commandment over me, nothing to answer to but my own desires. John says simply, *"sin is lawlessness"* {1 John 3:4}.

Notice what Jesus said lawlessness would do. It would not make people stop talking about love. It would make love *grow cold*.

That is a strange thing to hear in a culture that talks about love more than any generation in history. We have never had more songs, slogans, and sermons about love. And yet Jesus said that in the last days, when lawlessness abounds, love itself would cool.

How can both be true? Because there is a kind of love that is really lawlessness in disguise. It is love cut loose from God's commandments. It feels warm. It sounds kind. It accepts everything and asks nothing. But it has no anchor in what God has said, and so, slowly and quietly, it drifts away from God Himself. That is what I mean by **lawless love**.

Paul saw the same thing coming. He said that in the last days people would be *"lovers of themselves… lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power"* {2 Timothy 3:2–5}. Notice how many times the word "lovers" appears. The last days are not a time without love. They are a time when love is pointed in the wrong direction.

And lawless love needs something to protect it. It needs a verse that can silence anyone who says, "Wait, that's not what God said." In our day, that verse is "Judge not." It has become the guard standing at the door of lawless love, turning away every word of correction before it can come inside.

That is why this book is about both. You cannot recover the love of God without also recovering the courage to call sin what God calls it. And you cannot judge with righteous judgment unless your heart has been filled with the love that keeps His commandments.

The cure for love grown cold is not less of God's law. It is a love that has His law written on its heart {Hebrews 8:10}.

What this book is, and what it isn't

Let me say clearly what I am not saying.

I am not saying we are saved by keeping commandments. We are not. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast"* {Ephesians 2:8–9}. Nobody earns God's love. *"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* {Romans 5:8}. He loved us first {1 John 4:19}, and He loved us at our worst.

I am also not saying that Christians should be harsh, critical, or quick to condemn. Jesus did forbid a certain kind of judging, and we will look at it closely. The world has seen plenty of angry, self-righteous religion, and it has done great damage. If this book makes you more proud and less merciful, you have read it wrong.

What I am saying is this: the love of God is better, deeper, and stronger than the version we have been sold. It is a love that saves us and then changes us. It is a love that rescues us from sin, not a love that leaves us comfortable in it. It is a love that gives us commandments because it wants us to live. And it is a love that sometimes says the hardest thing in the room, because it would rather wound us than lose us.

"Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful" {Proverbs 27:6}.

The road ahead

Here is where we are going together:

- **In Part One, What Love Really Is,** we will let the Bible define love for us. We will look at what John

meant by “God is love,” what Jesus meant by “If you love Me, keep My commandments,” and why God’s commandments are a gift and not a weight.

- **In Part Two, When Love Says No,** we will look at the side of God’s love that our culture has forgotten: the love that corrects, disciplines, and teaches us to say no to sin. We will see that grace is not a license, but a teacher. And we will answer one of the most common objections of our day: “This is just how God made me.”
- **In Part Three, Judge Not?,** we will open Matthew 7 and read it the way Jesus preached it. We will see the kind of judging Jesus forbade and the kind He commanded, how to test fruit, how to speak the truth in love, and why both celebrating sin and staying silent can cost a soul, even from the pulpit.
- **In Part Four, Walking It Out,** we will see that we are in a real spiritual war, fought in the mind, look at the voices and company we allow to shape us, and then bring it all down to everyday life: what it looks like to walk in the love of God on a Tuesday afternoon.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a few questions under the heading **Examine Yourself.** Please don’t rush past them. Take them to the Lord in prayer. Write your answers down. Talk about them with a trusted friend or your small group. The goal of this book is not to give you more information about God. It is to bring you closer to Him. And at the end of the book, you will find a seven-day

devotional to help you return to the Lord with your whole heart.

A word before we begin

When I write about obedience, I don't write as someone who has mastered it. I have quoted "Judge not" before to protect myself when the Holy Spirit was trying to correct me. I have told myself "God knows my heart" when my heart was wandering. I know how easy it is to want a love that never asks anything of me.

But I have also learned that God's commandments are not walls to keep me from life. They are the banks of a river that keep the water flowing. When I have obeyed Him, even when it was hard, I have never once regretted it. When I have done things my own way, I have often regretted it deeply.

So let's open the Book together. Let's read like the Bereans, *"who received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so"* {Acts 17:11}.

Don't take my word for any of it. Take His.

Lord, I want to know Your love as it really is, not as I have imagined it. If I have made Your love smaller, softer, or more convenient than it really is, show me. Teach me to love You the way You have asked to be loved. Open my eyes to see that Your commandments are not burdensome, and give me a heart that delights to do Your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Part One: What Love Really Is

CHAPTER ONE

“God Is Love,” But What Kind?

“He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

{1 John 4:8–10}

Three words. “God is love.”

They may be the three most famous words in the Bible. They are painted on church walls, printed on coffee mugs, stitched on pillows, and posted on social media. And they are absolutely true. There is no greater truth in the universe than this one.

But here is the problem. Every time we read the word *love*, we fill it with a meaning. And most of us fill it with the meaning we learned from the world around us, not from the Bible.

If you grew up on love songs and romantic movies, love is a feeling that sweeps you off your feet. If you grew up in a home where love was earned, love is a reward for good behavior. If you live in our modern culture, love means acceptance, affirmation, and never making anyone feel bad about their choices.

So when we read "God is love," we tend to read it backward. Instead of letting God define love, we let our idea of love define God. We take our picture of love and say, "That is what God is like."

But John wrote it the other way around. God is the definition. Love is whatever God is. If we want to know what love is, we have to look at Him.

Love starts with God, not with us

Notice what John says in verse 10: *"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us."*

Love did not begin with us. It did not begin with our feelings toward God or our feelings toward each other. It began in the heart of God before the world was made. *"We love Him because He first loved us"* {1 John 4:19}.

This is the foundation of everything else in this book, so I want to make it very clear. God's love is not a reward for obedience. You can't earn it, and you don't deserve it. Neither do I. God loved us when we were His enemies {Romans 5:10}. He loved us when we were dead in our sins {Ephesians 2:4–5}. He loved us enough to send His only Son to die in our place.

If you take nothing else from this book, take this: God's love comes first. Everything God asks of us is a response to what He has already done for us.

But notice what kind of love this is. John doesn't describe a feeling. He describes an action. *"He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."*

A love that deals with sin

That word *propitiation* is not one we use every day. In Greek it is *hilasmos*. It refers to the sacrifice that turns away God's just anger against sin and makes peace between God and sinners. In the Greek Old Testament, a related word is used for the mercy seat, the golden lid of the ark of the covenant where the high priest sprinkled blood on the Day of Atonement {Leviticus 16:14–15; Hebrews 9:5}.

Think about what that means. When John wanted to show us the clearest picture of God's love, he didn't point us to a sunset or a hug. He pointed us to a sacrifice for sin.

The cross is the greatest display of God's love that has ever happened. But it is also the greatest display of how seriously God takes sin. If sin didn't matter to God, the cross would not have been necessary. If God could simply overlook sin, He would never have sent His Son to die for it.

So the love of God is not a love that ignores sin. It is a love that pays for sin. It is not a love that says, "Don't worry about it, it doesn't matter." It is a love that says, "It matters so much that I will die to free you from it."

That is a very different kind of love from the one our culture talks about.

Holy love

John wasn't the only one who described God. The Bible also tells us that God is holy. In fact, holiness is the only attribute of God that is repeated three times in a row. The seraphim in Isaiah's vision cry out, *"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts"* {Isaiah 6:3}, and the living creatures in Revelation say the same thing day and night {Revelation 4:8}.

We sometimes talk as if God's love and His holiness are in tension, as if His love wants to forgive and His holiness wants to punish, and He has to balance the two. But God is not divided. He is not part love and part holiness. He is completely both at the same time. His love is a holy love, and His holiness is a loving holiness.

That is why the same apostle who wrote "God is love" also wrote, *"God is light and in Him is no darkness at all"* {1 John 1:5}. And right after that, he said, *"If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth"* {1 John 1:6}.

God's love does not make room for darkness. His love brings us into the light.

What the Bible's words for love tell us

It's often said that the Greek language had several words for love, and that's true. The word used most in the New Testament for God's love is *agapē* (the noun) and *agapaō* (the verb). You may have heard it taught that *agapē* is a special, divine kind of love that is completely different from human love.

That's partly true, but we should be careful. The same verb is used in some surprising places. Jesus said that *"men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil"* {John 3:19}. Paul said that *"Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world"* {2 Timothy 4:10}. Both of those use the same verb, *agapaō*.

So the word itself doesn't make love holy. What makes love holy is what it is directed toward and how it behaves. Love can be pointed at the wrong things. People can love darkness. People can love the world. People can love themselves more than God {2 Timothy 3:2–4}. Love is not automatically good just because it is love.

What the New Testament does make clear is that *agapē* is more about choice and action than emotion. It is love that gives, serves, and sacrifices for the good of another. *"By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us"* {1 John 3:16}. *"My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth"* {1 John 3:18}.

The Hebrew Scriptures carry the same idea. One of the richest words in the Old Testament is *chesed*, often translated "mercy," "lovingkindness," or "steadfast love." It describes covenant love, the kind of loyal, faithful love that keeps its promises. And look at how God connects His *chesed* to His commandments in the Ten Commandments themselves:

"...but showing mercy [chesed] to thousands, to those who ***love Me and keep My commandments****"* {Exodus 20:6}.

From the very beginning, when God first spoke His commandments out loud from Mount Sinai, He linked loving

Him with keeping His commandments. John didn't invent that idea in 1 John 5:3. He learned it from Moses, and he heard it from Jesus.

Love that rejoices in the truth

Paul's famous description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is read at almost every wedding. But one line from that chapter is almost always skipped over:

"Love… does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth" {1 Corinthians 13:4–6}.

Love does not celebrate sin. It celebrates truth. Real love is never happy when someone it loves is doing something that will harm them.

Paul says it again in Romans: *"Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good"* {Romans 12:9}. Notice the order. Sincere love is described in the same breath as hating what is evil. They are not opposites. They belong together.

Think of a mother whose teenage son is starting to experiment with drugs. If she truly loves him, will she say, "Whatever makes you happy, sweetheart"? Of course not. She will fight for him. She will speak hard words. She may make choices he hates. And she will do it all *because* she loves him. Her love doesn't make her tolerate the thing that is killing him. Her love makes her hate it.

The psalmist said, *"You who love the LORD, hate evil!"* {Psalm 97:10}. That is not a contradiction. Anyone who loves a person will hate whatever destroys that person.

“Unconditional love”

You have probably heard that God’s love is unconditional. That phrase isn’t in the Bible, but there is a truth in it that we should hold tightly. God didn’t wait for us to clean ourselves up before He loved us. He didn’t set a condition we had to meet before He sent His Son. The gospel is good news for people who have nothing to offer.

But the phrase can also be misused. When people say “God’s love is unconditional,” they often mean, “So it doesn’t matter how I live.” And the Bible never says that.

Jesus said, *“If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love”* {John 15:10}. Jude wrote, *“Keep yourselves in the love of God”* {Jude 21}. Those verses tell us that there is a way to walk in God’s love and a way to walk away from it.

Here is a simple way to hold these truths together. God’s love *reaches* us without conditions. But God’s love does not *leave* us without change. It finds us in the mud, but it does not leave us there. A love that left us in our sin would not be a greater love. It would be a lesser one.

Looking at Jesus

If God is love, then the clearest picture of love the world has ever seen is Jesus. *“He who has seen Me has seen the Father”* {John 14:9}. So let’s look at how He loved.

He touched lepers when no one else would {Mark 1:41}. He ate with tax collectors and sinners {Mark 2:15–17}. He wept at the tomb of His friend {John 11:35}. He welcomed

children {Mark 10:14}. He forgave the woman who washed His feet with her tears {Luke 7:47–48}. He prayed for the men who were nailing Him to a cross {Luke 23:34}.

And this same Jesus also called people to repent {Matthew 4:17}. He told a crowd that unless they repented, they would all likewise perish {Luke 13:3, 5}. He drove the money changers out of the temple with a whip {John 2:15}. He called the religious leaders "hypocrites" and "whitewashed tombs" {Matthew 23:27}. He told the woman caught in adultery, *"Go and sin no more"* {John 8:11}. He told a man He had just healed, *"Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you"* {John 5:14}.

There is one moment in the Gospels that I think captures the whole thing. A rich young man ran up to Jesus, knelt before Him, and asked how to inherit eternal life. Jesus talked with him about the commandments, and the young man said he had kept them all since his youth. Then Mark tells us this:

*"Then Jesus, looking at him, **loved him**, and said to him, 'One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me'"* {Mark 10:21}.

Jesus loved him. And because He loved him, He told him the one thing he did not want to hear. He put His finger on the one idol that was standing between this man and eternal life. And the man went away sad, because he had great possessions {Mark 10:22}.

Notice that Jesus did not run after him and lower the price. He let him go. That was love too. Jesus would not lie to him to keep him.

That is the love of God. It is tender enough to look at a sinner with compassion, and strong enough to tell him the truth.

Letting God define love

So here is where we land at the end of this first chapter. When we say “God is love,” we have to let God fill in what love means. And when we do, we discover that His love:

- comes first, before we ever loved Him
- is shown most clearly at the cross, where it dealt with sin
- is holy, and has no fellowship with darkness
- rejoices in the truth and does not rejoice in sin
- reaches us as we are but does not leave us as we are
- tells the truth even when the truth is hard to hear

That is not a weaker love than the one the world offers. It is far stronger. The world’s love says, “I accept you.” God’s love says, “I will make you new.”

In the next chapter, we will look at the verse that gives this book its foundation, and we will see that John, the apostle of love, had a very clear answer to the question, “What does it look like to love God?”

Examine Yourself

1. Before reading this chapter, what did you picture when you heard the words “God is love”? Where did that picture come from?

2. Have you ever let your own idea of love define God, instead of letting God define love? In what way?

3. Read Mark 10:17–22. What does it tell you about how Jesus loves? Is there “one thing” He might be putting His finger on in your life?

4. Romans 12:9 puts sincere love and hating evil side by side. Is there something harmful in your life, or in the life of someone you love, that you have learned to tolerate instead of hate?

CHAPTER TWO

This Is the Love of God

"Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him."

{1 John 2:3–5}

Some verses whisper. Others shout. First John 5:3 is one of the shouting ones, but somehow most of us have never heard it.

"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome."

I have sat in church for many years, and I have heard a great many sermons on love. I have heard 1 Corinthians 13 more times than I can count. I have heard John 3:16 preached from every angle. But I can only remember a handful of times I have heard a sermon on 1 John 5:3. It is as if the church has collectively decided that this verse is too dangerous to say out loud, because someone might think we are teaching salvation by works.

But John wasn't afraid to say it. And he didn't say it once. He said it over and over again, from the beginning of his letter to the end.

Why John wrote this letter

To understand any verse, we need to know why it was written. John tells us his purpose plainly: *"These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life"* {1 John 5:13}.

John wrote so that believers could have assurance. He wanted them to *know*, not just hope, that they belonged to God.

But John was also writing in a crisis. A group of people had left the church he was writing to. *"They went out from us, but they were not of us"* {1 John 2:19}. From the clues in the letter, many scholars believe these people claimed to have a special, higher knowledge of God, while denying that Jesus had truly come in the flesh {1 John 4:2–3} and treating sin as if it didn't really matter. They said things like "I know Him" {2:4}, "We have fellowship with Him" {1:6}, and "We have no sin" {1:8}.

So John gave his readers a set of tests. Not tests to earn salvation, but tests to tell the difference between real faith and counterfeit faith. And one of the tests he returns to again and again is this one: **Do you keep His commandments?**

John's tests

Look at how often John comes back to it:

- *"Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments"* {1 John 2:3}.
- *"He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him"* {2:4}.
- *"He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked"* {2:6}.
- *"Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness"* {3:4}.
- *"Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous"* {3:7}.
- *"And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight"* {3:22}.
- *"Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him"* {3:24}.
- *"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments"* {5:3}.

And in his second letter, he says it one more time: *"This is love, that we walk according to His commandments"* {2 John 6}.

That is not a passing thought. That is a theme. John is saying, as clearly as he can, that knowing God, loving God, and abiding in God cannot be separated from keeping His commandments.

Notice that little phrase in 1 John 3:7: *"Let no one deceive you."* John expected that someone would try to talk believers out of this. Someone would come along and say, "It doesn't really matter how you live, as long as you have the right knowledge or the right feelings." And John says, don't be fooled.

What "keep" means

The Greek word John uses for "keep" is *tēreō*. It is a beautiful word. It means to watch over, to guard, to hold onto something carefully, to treasure it and protect it. It is used for guards keeping watch over a prisoner {Acts 12:5–6} and for wine that had been kept until the end of the wedding feast {John 2:10}. Jesus used it when He prayed for His disciples: *"Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me"* {John 17:11}.

So when John talks about keeping God's commandments, he doesn't picture a nervous employee checking off a list so he won't get fired. He pictures someone guarding a treasure. Someone who has been given something precious and is holding onto it with both hands.

The Hebrew Scriptures carry the same picture. The word most often used for keeping God's commandments is *shamar*, which also means to guard, to watch, to protect. It is the same word used in Genesis 2:15, when God placed Adam in the garden *"to tend and keep it."* From the very beginning, keeping was a loving act of care.

You keep what you value. A woman keeps her grandmother's wedding ring in a safe place. A soldier keeps the letters his wife sent him while he was overseas. Nobody has to force them. They keep those things because those things are precious to them.

That is what John means. When we love God, His Word becomes precious to us, and we keep it.

What "commandments" means

Someone will ask: which commandments is John talking about?

In 1 John 3:23, John sums them up: *"And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment."* Faith in Jesus and love for one another are the heart of it.

But John doesn't let us turn "love one another" into a vague feeling, either. In the same letter, he says that *"sin is lawlessness"* {3:4}. The Greek word there is *anomia*, literally "without law." Sin is living as if God had never spoken. It is the same word Jesus used for the people He will send away on the last day: *"I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"* {Matthew 7:23}.

Jesus Himself told us how God's commandments fit together. When He was asked which commandment was the greatest, He answered:

"'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first

and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" {Matthew 22:37–40}.

Notice what Jesus did and did not say. He didn't say that love *replaces* the Law and the Prophets. He said that the Law and the Prophets *hang* on love. Love is the nail, and God's commandments hang on it. Take away the nail and everything falls to the floor. But the nail was never meant to hang there empty.

Paul said the same thing: *"Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law"* {Romans 13:10}. Just before that, he listed the commandments: do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not covet {Romans 13:9}. Love doesn't erase those commandments. Love fulfills them. Love is what keeping them looks like when it comes from the heart.

So when John says, "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments," he is saying something the whole Bible agrees with. Love for God is not a feeling that floats free of what God has said. It is a heart that treasures what He has said and walks in it.

"The love of God"

Here is a detail that's easy to miss. In Greek, the phrase "the love of God" can mean two things. It can mean *our love for God*, or it can mean *God's love* for us, flowing in and through us. Scholars have discussed which one John means in places like 1 John 2:5 and 5:3.

In 1 John 5:3, the main sense seems to be our love for God, since verse 2 talks about loving God and keeping His commandments. But I don't think we have to choose too sharply. The love we have for God is His love first. *"The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us"* {Romans 5:5}. God's love comes into us, and it comes back out of us as love for Him, which shows itself in obedience.

That is why John says in 1 John 2:5 that whoever keeps His word, *"truly the love of God is perfected in him."* The word "perfected" is *teleioō*, which means brought to its goal, completed, finished. God's love reaches its goal in us when it produces obedience. Obedience isn't the root of His love. It is the fruit.

What John is not saying

We need to be very careful here, because this is where many sincere believers get worried.

John is not saying that we earn God's love by keeping commandments. He has already told us that God loved us first {4:10, 19}. And he is not saying that we must be sinless. In fact, he says the opposite: *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* {1 John 1:8–9}.

And then: *"My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous"* {1 John 2:1}.

Do you see the balance? John writes “so that you may not sin.” That is the goal. But “if anyone sins,” there is an Advocate. Jesus stands ready to forgive and restore the one who confesses.

When John talks about the person who “practices” sin or “practices” righteousness {3:7–9}, he uses verbs that describe an ongoing pattern, the direction of a life. He is not talking about a believer who stumbles, repents, and gets back up. He is talking about someone who has made peace with sin, who lives in it, and who still says, “I know Him.”

The question John asks is not, “Have you ever sinned?” We all have. The question is, “Which way is your life pointed? Toward His commandments, or away from them?”

Assurance, not anxiety

Remember why John wrote: *“that you may know that you have eternal life”* {5:13}.

John’s tests are not meant to make sincere believers anxious. They are meant to give us confidence. If you love God, and that love is leading you to treasure His Word and walk in it, even imperfectly, that is evidence that God’s love is at work in you. That is the fruit of a real tree.

But the tests also have a sharp edge. The person who says “I know Him” and has no interest at all in His commandments has a reason to stop and examine themselves. John doesn’t soften it. He says that person *“is a liar, and the truth is not in him”* {2:4}.

That is strong language, but it is loving language. It is the kind of warning a doctor gives when he sees a shadow

on an X-ray. It's not pleasant to hear. But it's far worse not to hear it.

Love that can be seen

Our culture talks about love as something invisible, something that lives only in the heart. "I love God in my own way." "God knows my heart." But John says love for God can be seen. It shows up in what we do.

"But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" {1 John 3:17}.

That is practical. John says that love for God shows up in what you do with your money when a brother is in need. It shows up in whether you keep His Word. It shows up in how you treat your brothers and sisters in Christ. Love that never becomes visible is not the love John is talking about.

This is good news. It means love for God is not a mystery. You don't have to wonder whether you are feeling it strongly enough. You can know you love Him by doing what He says. Feelings come and go. But a heart that keeps choosing to obey Him, on the good days and the bad days, is a heart that loves Him.

In the next chapter, we will see that John didn't come up with this idea on his own. He heard it from the lips of Jesus, on the night before the cross.

Examine Yourself

1. Have you ever heard a sermon or teaching on 1 John 5:3? Why do you think this verse is so rarely taught?

2. The word “keep” means to guard and treasure. Do you treat God’s commandments like a treasure to protect or a list to get through? Be honest.

3. Read 1 John 2:3–6. What test does John give for knowing God? How does your life measure up to it, not perfectly, but in its direction?

4. John says love for God can be seen. If someone watched your life for a week, what evidence would they find that you love God?

CHAPTER THREE

“If You Love Me”

“If you love Me, keep My commandments.
And I will pray the Father, and He will give
you another Helper, that He may abide
with you forever.”

{John 14:15–16}

The room is upstairs, and it smells of roasted lamb and wine and bread.

Oil lamps throw shadows across the low table. It is the night of the Passover, and outside, Jerusalem is crowded with pilgrims. Inside, thirteen men are reclining around the meal. The floor is still damp in places, because an hour ago the Teacher did something no teacher ever does. He wrapped a towel around His waist, knelt on the floor, and washed their feet. Every one of them. Even the one who was about to betray Him.

That one is gone now. Judas got up in the middle of supper and walked out. John, who was there, wrote it down in four short words: *“And it was night”* {John 13:30}.

The mood in the room has shifted. Jesus is talking about leaving. *“Where I am going, you cannot come”* {John

13:33}. The disciples don't understand. They are confused, and some of them are afraid.

And then Peter speaks.

Of course it's Peter. It's always Peter. The one who jumped out of the boat. The one who blurted out the answer first. The one with the biggest heart and the quickest mouth.

"Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake" {John 13:37}.

It is the boldest declaration of love anyone makes that night. And Peter means every word.

Jesus looks at him. And with what must have been great sadness, He says, *"Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times"* {John 13:38}.

The room goes quiet.

And then, a few breaths later (our Bibles put a chapter break here, but there was no break in the conversation), Jesus begins to speak words of comfort. *"Let not your heart be troubled"* {John 14:1}. He tells them about His Father's house. He tells them He is the way, the truth, and the life. And then He says the sentence that this whole chapter is about:

"If you love Me, keep My commandments" {John 14:15}.

Do you see what just happened? The loudest "I love You" in the room has just been spoken. And Jesus, knowing that

this same man will deny Him before sunrise, gently tells all of them what love actually looks like.

Not a promise. Not a declaration. Not a feeling, however sincere.

Keeping His word.

Four times before midnight

We tend to think of John 14:15 as a single verse. But in that one conversation, on the last night before the cross, Jesus came back to the same truth again and again, as if He wanted to make absolutely sure they never forgot it:

"If you love Me, keep My commandments" {John 14:15}.

"He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me" {John 14:21}.

"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word… He who does not love Me does not keep My words" {John 14:23–24}.

"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love" {John 15:10}.

And then the one that would have stopped me cold if I had been in that room: *"You are My friends if you do whatever I command you"* {John 15:14}.

Think about the setting. These are some of the last words Jesus spoke before His arrest. When a person knows they are about to die, they don't waste words. They say what matters most. And what Jesus chose to say, over and over,

on His last night, was that loving Him and obeying Him cannot be pulled apart.

John never forgot it. He was sitting right next to Jesus that night {John 13:23}. Decades later, as an old man writing to the churches, he was still saying it: *"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments"* {1 John 5:3}. He had heard it from the Master's own lips in the lamplight.

Love is the root, obedience is the fruit

Now, look carefully at the order of Jesus' words, because the order changes everything.

He did not say, "Keep My commandments, and then I will love you." That is religion, and it is exhausting. It turns God into a boss you are always trying to impress and never quite satisfy.

He said, *"If you love Me, keep My commandments."* Love comes first. Obedience grows out of it.

In fact, some translations render it as a promise: *"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments"* (ESV). Either way, the point is the same. When you truly love Jesus, keeping His word is not a weight you drag behind you. It is what love does. It is the fruit that grows naturally on the tree.

That is the difference between religion and the gospel. Religion says, "Obey, and maybe you will be accepted." The gospel says, "You have been accepted in Christ. Now love Him, and show it." Same commandments. Completely different heart.

But here is where many of us have gotten it twisted. We love to say, “It’s a relationship, not a religion.” And that’s true! But somewhere along the way, “relationship” came to mean “feelings, not obedience.” As if a relationship with Jesus were all warmth and no expectations.

Imagine a husband who tells his wife every morning, “I love you more than anything,” and then spends every evening doing exactly what he knows breaks her heart. What would you say about his love? You would say his words and his life are telling two different stories. And you would believe his life.

Jesus offers us the closest relationship a human being can have. But He described it in His own words: *“You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.”* It is real friendship. It is warm and personal and deep. But it is friendship with the King.

What He promises to the one who obeys

Here is what we usually miss. We read these verses as if they were only demands. But every one of them is wrapped around a promise, and the promises are breathtaking.

To the one who keeps His commandments, Jesus says: *“I will love him and **manifest Myself to him**”* {John 14:21}. To manifest means to make visible, to show clearly. Jesus is promising to reveal Himself, personally, to the one who obeys.

Judas (not Iscariot) heard that and couldn’t believe it. *“Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and*

not to the world?" {John 14:22}. And Jesus' answer is one of the most beautiful sentences in the Bible:

"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and ***We will come to him and make Our home with him****"* {John 14:23}.

The word for "home" is *monē*. It is the same word Jesus used just a few minutes earlier when He said, *"In My Father's house are many mansions"* {John 14:2}. Jesus is going to prepare a dwelling place for us in heaven. But here He says something astonishing: the Father and the Son will come and make a dwelling place *in us*, right now, if we love Him and keep His word.

And then, in the next chapter: *"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full"* {John 15:11}.

His presence. His home in us. His joy, full.

So many believers are hungry for exactly these things. They want to feel close to God. They want to sense His presence. They want joy that doesn't evaporate on Monday morning. And they chase it from conference to conference, from one worship experience to the next. Those things can be wonderful. But Jesus told us plainly where the door is. It is the door of obedience.

Obedience is not the price of His presence. It is the path to it.

The Son who said yes

Jesus never asks us to walk a road He hasn't walked Himself. In John 15:10, He puts our obedience side by side with His own: *"...just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love."*

His whole life was a yes to the Father. *"My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me"* {John 4:34}. *"I always do those things that please Him"* {John 8:29}.

And as they got up to leave that upper room, He said this: *"But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so I do. Arise, let us go from here"* {John 14:31}.

Stop and picture it. They stand up from the table. They walk out into the dark streets, down through the city, across the Kidron Valley, toward a garden called Gethsemane. Jesus knows exactly what is waiting for Him there. And He tells them why He is going: *so that the world may know that I love the Father.*

How would the world know He loved the Father? Not because He said so. Because He obeyed, all the way to the cross.

A few hours later, in the garden, with His sweat falling like great drops of blood, He prayed, *"Nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done"* {Luke 22:42, 44}. And the next day, He *"became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross"* {Philippians 2:8}.

That is what perfect love looks like. Not a feeling that stays safely inside. A surrender that walks out the door and goes all the way to Calvary.

“Lord, Lord”

Earlier in His ministry, Jesus had asked a question that cuts right through every sincere religious feeling we have ever had:

“But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” {Luke 6:46}.

The word “Lord” is *kyrios*: master, owner, the one in charge. Calling Jesus “Lord” and ignoring what He says is like a soldier who salutes his commander with great enthusiasm and then refuses every order.

And Jesus followed that question with a story. Two men built two houses. From the street, they probably looked the same. Same windows. Same roof. Same fresh paint. But one man dug down deep and laid his foundation on rock. The other built right on the sand.

Then the storm came. The rain fell, the river rose, the wind slammed against both houses. One stood. The other collapsed, *“and the ruin of that house was great”* {Luke 6:49}.

What made the difference? Both men *heard* the words of Jesus. Only one *did* them {Luke 6:47–49}.

You can’t tell the difference between those two houses on a sunny day. You can only tell when the storm hits. And every life will face a storm.

“All things”

After the resurrection, on a mountain in Galilee, Jesus gave His disciples their mission:

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations… **teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you**; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* {Matthew 28:19–20}.

The word “observe” is *tēreō*, the same word for “keep” in John 14:15 and 1 John 5:3. Jesus didn’t send His followers out to collect decisions. He sent them to make disciples who would *keep* everything He commanded.

If we only ever tell people that Jesus loves them, and never teach them to keep what He said, we have only delivered half of the message. And it’s not the half Jesus spelled out.

You were never meant to do this alone

Now, if you are feeling the weight of all this, I want you to go back to that upper room, because Jesus didn’t end His sentence where we often end it.

*“If you love Me, keep My commandments. **And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever**—the Spirit of truth”* {John 14:15–17}.

In the very same breath that He tells us to obey, He promises us help.

The word is *paraklētos*: one called alongside. An advocate, a counselor, a comforter, a strengthener. Think of a coach running beside a runner, or a friend who puts your arm over his shoulder and walks you the rest of the way home.

Jesus knew exactly who He was talking to. He had just told Peter that he would deny Him three times. He knew these men would scatter before morning. He knew they could not keep His commandments in their own strength. So He didn't just give them a command. He gave them Himself, by His Spirit.

God promised this centuries before through Ezekiel: *"I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes"* {Ezekiel 36:27}. And Paul says it plainly: *"For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure"* {Philippians 2:13}.

That means two things. It means you can't do this alone. And it means you don't have to.

Another fire

Let's go back to Peter.

He did exactly what Jesus said he would do. Later that same night, in the courtyard of the high priest, Peter stood warming his hands at a *"fire of coals"* {John 18:18}. And three times, as the night grew colder, he swore he had never known the Man. Then the rooster crowed, and Peter went out and wept bitterly {Luke 22:61–62}.

The man who had promised to die for Jesus couldn't even admit to a servant girl that he knew Him.

Fast forward a few weeks. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive. And early one morning, after a long night of catching nothing, the disciples see a figure on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. When they come to land, they find breakfast already cooking. And John tells us exactly what Jesus was cooking it on: *"a fire of coals"* {John 21:9}.

It is the same Greek word, *anthrakia*, used only twice in the whole New Testament: once at the fire where Peter denied Jesus, and once at the fire where Jesus restored him.

Can you imagine what Peter felt when he smelled that smoke?

After breakfast, Jesus turns to him. Not with a lecture. Not with an "I told you so." With a question.

"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?"

Three times He asks. Three times, once for every denial. And Peter, grieved, finally says, *"Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You"* {John 21:17}.

Notice what Peter doesn't do this time. He doesn't make a grand promise. He doesn't say, "I'll die for You." He has learned that his own declarations are not enough. He simply appeals to what Jesus can see in his heart.

And each time, Jesus answers the same way. Not with "Prove it with a speech," but with a command: *"Feed My lambs." "Tend My sheep." "Feed My sheep."* And then the words that started it all, three years earlier, on another shore: *"Follow Me"* {John 21:15–19}.

That is the whole chapter in one scene. Love isn't proven by what we promise around the table. It is proven by what we do when we get up from it.

And here is the good news for every one of us who has ever said "I love You, Lord" and then failed Him: Jesus still builds a fire. He still asks the question. And He still gives the same answer to everyone who says yes.

If you love Me, follow Me.

Examine Yourself

1. Peter declared his love loudly, then failed. Have you ever made a big promise to God and not kept it? What did you learn about the difference between declaring love and showing it?

2. Read John 14:15–24 slowly. What does Jesus promise to the one who keeps His word? Which of those promises do you most long to experience?

3. Jesus asked, "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?" Is there something He has clearly told you to do that you have not yet done?

4. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit in the same breath as His command. When was the last time you asked the Helper specifically to help you obey in an area where you struggle?

CHAPTER FOUR

Not Burdensome

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

{Matthew 11:28–30}

The moment you start talking about God's commandments, someone gets nervous. The word *commandment* sounds heavy. It sounds like rules, restrictions, and a long list of things you're not allowed to do. It sounds like the opposite of freedom.

John knew that. That's why he didn't end his sentence after "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments." He added five more words: *"And His commandments are not burdensome"* {1 John 5:3}.

It is one of the most freeing sentences in the Bible, and one of the most ignored.

The word John chose

The Greek word translated "burdensome" is *barys*. It means heavy, weighty, oppressive, hard to bear. It is the kind of weight that wears you down and crushes you.

Now here is something remarkable. Jesus used that very same word when He was rebuking the scribes and Pharisees:

"For they bind heavy [barys] burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers" {Matthew 23:4}.

What were those heavy burdens? Jesus tells us throughout Matthew 23 and elsewhere. They were the religious leaders' own traditions, piled on top of God's Word. Rules about which oaths counted and which didn't {Matthew 23:16–22}, how to wash your hands and your cups {Mark 7:1–4}. Jesus said they had *"laid aside the commandment of God"* in order to *"hold the tradition of men"* {Mark 7:8}. They even used their traditions to get out of honoring their own parents {Mark 7:9–13}.

So when John says God's commandments are not *barys*, he is drawing a line. There is a kind of religion that is heavy and crushing. It is made up of human rules, human pride, and human performance. And it often lays aside what God actually said. That is what Jesus condemned.

But God's own commandments are not like that. They are not *barys*. They are not crushing.

This is so important, because many people have been hurt by heavy religion. They grew up under rules that had

more to do with a church's culture than with God's Word. They were made to feel that God was never pleased with them. And so, when they hear the word "commandment," they flinch. If that is you, I want you to hear this clearly: the heaviness you experienced was not the love of God. And the answer to heavy religion is not throwing away God's commandments. It is returning to them, and finding out that they are lighter than you were ever told.

An easy yoke

In Matthew 11, Jesus offers rest to people who are *"heavy laden."* But notice what He offers them: a yoke.

A yoke was a wooden beam fitted across the necks of oxen so they could pull together. It was a tool for work. Jesus didn't offer the weary no work at all. He offered them *His* yoke, and He said it was *"easy."*

The Greek word for "easy" is *chrēstos*. It means kind, good, useful, well-fitting. Jesus grew up as a carpenter's son {Matthew 13:55}, and in that world a carpenter might well have shaped yokes. A good yoke was carefully shaped to fit the animal that wore it, so that it wouldn't rub or chafe. A badly made yoke would leave sores. A well-made one let the ox pull with its full strength without pain.

Jesus is saying, "My yoke fits. It was made for you."

And notice where the rest comes from: *"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me… and you will find rest for your souls."* The rest isn't found in throwing off every yoke. It's found in taking His.

That is the opposite of what our culture teaches. Our culture says freedom means having no master. Jesus says freedom means having the right one.

The first lie

Why do so many of us feel that God's commands are heavy? The answer goes all the way back to the garden.

God put Adam and Eve in a paradise filled with good things. *"Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die"* {Genesis 2:16–17}.

Think about that commandment. God gave them every tree but one. The command was not heavy. It was generous. And it came with a warning that was itself an act of love: "Don't eat this, because it will kill you."

But then the serpent came, and the first thing he did was twist God's command into something heavy: *"Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?"* {Genesis 3:1}. Notice the trick. God had said they could eat from every tree but one. The serpent made it sound as if God had forbidden everything.

Then he went further: *"You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God"* {Genesis 3:4–5}.

That is the oldest lie in the world. It says God's commandments are there to hold you back. God is keeping something good from you. Obedience will cost you your

happiness. If you really want to live, you'll have to step outside of what He said.

Every time we feel that God's commandments are a burden, we are hearing an echo of that lie.

For your good

The truth is the opposite. God's commandments are given for our good. Moses said it plainly to Israel:

"And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today ***for your good****?"* {Deuteronomy 10:12–13}.

And again: *"And the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God,* ***for our good always****, that He might preserve us alive"* {Deuteronomy 6:24}.

Listen to the longing in God's voice in this verse: *"Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!"* {Deuteronomy 5:29}.

That is not the voice of a harsh taskmaster. It is the voice of a Father who wants His children to live.

Think of the manufacturer's manual that comes with a new car. It tells you what kind of fuel to use, how often to

change the oil, and what the warning lights mean. No one reads that manual and says, “How dare they restrict my freedom!” The people who made the car know how it works best. Following the manual doesn’t limit the car. It keeps it running.

God made us. He knows how life works. His commandments are the Maker’s instructions for living the life He designed us to live.

Not too hard, not too far

Near the end of Deuteronomy, Moses said something that sounds a lot like 1 John 5:3:

“For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’… But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it” {Deuteronomy 30:11–14}.

The Hebrew word translated “too mysterious” (or “too hard” in some versions) is *pala’*, which means too difficult, too extraordinary, beyond reach. God is saying, “What I’m asking of you is not out of reach.”

Paul quotes this very passage in Romans 10:6–8 and applies it to the word of faith in Christ. In Christ, the word has come near in the most personal way possible. He is the Word made flesh {John 1:14}. And through the new covenant, God has done what Moses longed for. He has written His law on our hearts {Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10}. The word isn’t carved only on stone anymore. It’s *“in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.”*

Why they are not burdensome

It is worth asking: why exactly does John say God's commandments are not burdensome? The answer is in the very next verse:

"For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" {1 John 5:4}.

Notice the word "For." John is giving a reason. God's commandments are not burdensome *because* those who are born of God have been given a new nature that overcomes the world.

If you try to keep God's commandments with an unchanged heart, they will feel heavy. Of course they will. Paul says that *"the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be"* {Romans 8:7}. The old nature resents every word God says.

But the new birth changes that. God gives us a new heart, puts His Spirit within us, and causes us to walk in His statutes {Ezekiel 36:26–27}. What once felt like a chain begins to feel like a path home. The born-again heart begins to say with the psalmist, *"I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart"* {Psalm 40:8}.

This is one reason that a person who finds all of God's commandments to be a heavy burden should stop and ask some honest questions. Not "Am I perfect?" but "Has my heart truly been made new? Am I walking in the Spirit, or trying to do this in my own strength?"

What makes it light: love

There is a sweet little verse in Genesis about Jacob, who worked for his uncle Laban for seven years so that he could marry Rachel. Seven years of hard labor in the fields. And the Bible says: *"So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her"* {Genesis 29:20}.

Love made the work light.

That is exactly what John means. God's commandments are not burdensome to the one who loves Him. When you love someone, doing what pleases them doesn't feel like a burden. A mother who gets up at three in the morning with a sick child doesn't feel oppressed by that "rule." She does it because she loves her child.

The same is true with God. The more we love Him, the lighter His commandments become. And the less we love Him, the heavier they feel. So if obedience feels like a crushing weight, the answer is not to get rid of the commandments. The answer is to ask God to deepen our love.

What is really heavy

Here is what we often forget. The heaviest burden in the world is not God's commandments. It is sin.

"Good understanding gains favor, but the way of the unfaithful is hard" {Proverbs 13:15}.

Sin promises freedom, but it delivers bondage. *"Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin"* {John 8:34}. Ask

anyone who has been bound by addiction, by an affair, by debt, by bitterness, or by lies they had to keep track of. Sin is not light. It wraps itself around us. That is why Hebrews tells us to *"lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us"* {Hebrews 12:1}.

The person who throws off God's commandments to be free usually ends up carrying a much heavier load than the one they put down.

But the psalmist found the opposite: *"And I will walk at liberty, for I seek Your precepts"* {Psalm 119:45}. James calls God's Word *"the perfect law of liberty"* {James 1:25}. The way of obedience is the way of freedom.

Sweeter than honey

Psalm 19 may be the most beautiful description of God's Word ever written. Listen to how David describes it:

"The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes… More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward" {Psalm 19:7–11}.

David didn't see God's commandments as a weight. He saw them as gold and honey. They revived his soul, gave him wisdom, made his heart glad, and opened his eyes.

That is the testimony of those who walk with God. His commandments are not burdensome. They are a gift.

Examine Yourself

1. When you hear the word “commandment,” what is your first emotional reaction? Where do you think that reaction came from?

2. Have you ever been under “heavy” religion: rules that came from people rather than from God’s Word? How has that shaped the way you see God?

3. Is there a commandment of God that feels heavy to you right now? Ask the Lord honestly: is the problem the command, or is it something in my heart?

4. Read Psalm 19:7–11 aloud. Which of David’s descriptions of God’s Word would you like to become true in your own experience?

Part Two: When Love Says No

CHAPTER FIVE

The Love That Corrects

“My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.”

{Hebrews 12:5–6}

Imagine two fathers watching their young sons play near a busy street.

The first father sees his son wander toward the curb. He smiles and says nothing. The boy steps into the road. A car swerves. The father shrugs. “I don’t want to crush his spirit,” he says. “I love him too much to tell him no.”

The second father sees his son heading toward the curb, and he runs. He grabs the boy’s arm, maybe harder than the boy likes. He kneels down, looks him in the eye, and says firmly, “No. You do not go into the street. Ever.” The boy cries. He is upset with his father. He doesn’t understand.

Which father loves his son?

We all know the answer. And yet, when it comes to God, many of us have been taught to believe in the first father. A God who sees us heading toward destruction and says nothing, because He loves us too much to correct us.

That is not the God of the Bible.

Whom the Lord loves

The writer of Hebrews was speaking to believers who were going through hard times. Some of them were tempted to give up. And he reminded them of a passage they should have known by heart, from Proverbs 3:11–12:

"My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" {Hebrews 12:5–6}.

The word translated "chastening" is *paideia*. It comes from the word for a child, *pais*. It means child-training: the whole process of raising a child, including instruction, correction, and discipline. It is not punishment for the sake of punishment. It is the kind of training a loving parent gives to shape a child into a mature adult.

Then the writer says something that should stop us in our tracks:

"If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons" {Hebrews 12:7–8}.

Do you hear what he is saying? God's correction is a sign that you belong to Him. It's proof of sonship. A father doesn't discipline the neighbor's children. He disciplines his own. If God never corrected you, never convicted you, never put His finger on anything in your life, that wouldn't be a sign of His love. It would be a reason for alarm.

The purpose of discipline

Why does God correct His children? Hebrews tells us:

"For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" {Hebrews 12:10–11}.

There are three beautiful phrases in those verses.

"For our profit." God's discipline is always for our good. Earthly fathers sometimes discipline out of anger, frustration, or their own convenience. They do it "as seemed best to them," and sometimes they get it wrong. But God never gets it wrong. His correction is always aimed at our benefit.

"That we may be partakers of His holiness." The goal of God's discipline is to make us like Him. He isn't trying to make us miserable. He is trying to make us holy, because holiness is where true life and joy are found.

"The peaceable fruit of righteousness." Discipline is painful at the time. Hebrews admits that honestly. But afterward, it produces peace and righteousness in the one

who has been trained by it. The word “trained” is *gymnazō*, from which we get our word “gymnasium.” God’s discipline is like a workout. It hurts in the moment, but it builds strength.

The psalmist learned this firsthand: *“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word… It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes”* {Psalm 119:67, 71}.

Notice the connection. Before the correction, he went astray. After it, he kept God’s word. The discipline brought him back to obedience, and he called it good.

“As many as I love”

In the book of Revelation, Jesus sends a letter to the church in Laodicea. It is the harshest of the seven letters. He tells them they are lukewarm, and that He is about to vomit them out of His mouth. He tells them they think they are rich, but they are actually *“wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked”* {Revelation 3:17}.

And then He tells them why He is saying all of this:

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent” {Revelation 3:19}.

The word “rebuke” is *elenchō*. It means to expose, to bring to light, to convict, to show someone their fault. It is the same word Jesus used to describe the work of the Holy Spirit, who would *“convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment”* {John 16:8}.

The harshest words Jesus spoke to any church were spoken in love. He rebuked them *because* He loved them. And immediately after the rebuke came the invitation: *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me"* {Revelation 3:20}.

The rebuke and the knock come from the same hand.

Faithful wounds

The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about correction, and much of it would sound strange to modern ears.

"Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful" {Proverbs 27:5–6}.

Think about that. Love that stays hidden, that never speaks up, is worth less than an open rebuke. A friend who wounds you with the truth is more faithful than an enemy who kisses you with flattery. (It's worth remembering that Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss.)

"Whoever loves instruction loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid" {Proverbs 12:1}. Solomon didn't soften that one.

"He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly" {Proverbs 13:24}.

According to Proverbs, refusing to correct a child isn't love. It is a kind of hatred, because it leaves the child unprepared for life and unprotected from his own

foolishness. Whatever you think about methods of discipline, the principle is clear: love corrects.

God corrects so He doesn't have to condemn

One of the most comforting verses on this subject is tucked into Paul's instructions about the Lord's Supper. The Corinthians were taking communion in an unworthy way, and some of them were sick and some had even died {1 Corinthians 11:30}. That is sobering. But then Paul says:

"But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world" {1 Corinthians 11:32}.

Read that slowly. God's discipline in the life of a believer is designed to keep us from being condemned. He corrects us now so that we won't be lost later. His discipline is a rescue.

This is why God's correction should never make a true believer feel hopeless. It is the evidence that He has not given up on you. He is still at work. He is still pursuing you.

The most frightening thing

If God's correction is a sign of His love, then what is the most frightening thing that can happen to a person? It is for God to stop correcting them.

In Romans 1, Paul describes people who knew the truth about God but suppressed it. And three times he says the same chilling thing: *"God gave them up"* {Romans 1:24, 26, 28}. God let them have what they insisted on.

Through the prophet Hosea, God said of His people, *"Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone"* {Hosea 4:17}.

That is the opposite of love. The first father in our story, the one who let his son walk into the street, wasn't being loving. He was being absent. When God corrects us, it means He is still near. When we feel Him convicting us, it means He has not let us go.

So if the Holy Spirit is putting His finger on something in your life right now, don't resent it. Thank Him for it. It means you are His.

A word of balance

We need to be careful here, because Scripture is careful. Not every hardship in a believer's life is God's discipline for a specific sin.

Job suffered terribly, and God Himself said Job was *"blameless and upright"* {Job 1:8}. Job's friends assumed his suffering must be punishment, and God rebuked them for it {Job 42:7}. When the disciples saw a man born blind and asked whose sin had caused it, Jesus said, *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him"* {John 9:3}.

So we shouldn't look at every illness, loss, or setback and assume God is angry with us, or with someone else. That is not what Hebrews 12 teaches. What it teaches is that God uses even our hardships to train us, and that when He does correct us for sin, it is always out of love.

And we should be equally careful with each other. It is one thing to say, “God disciplines those He loves.” It is another thing to stand over a suffering friend and say, “This must be because of your sin.” That was the mistake of Job’s friends. We will talk more about this in Part Three.

How to respond to God’s correction

Hebrews 12:5 gives us two wrong responses to God’s discipline: *“do not despise… nor be discouraged.”*

To **despise** discipline is to take it too lightly. It is to shrug it off, ignore it, explain it away, or harden your heart against it. That is the person who feels the conviction of the Spirit and says, “It’s not a big deal,” or “God knows my heart.”

To be **discouraged** (literally, to faint or give out) is to take it too heavily. It is to collapse under it, to conclude that God has rejected you, or that you are too far gone. That is the person who feels conviction and says, “I’ll never change. God must be finished with me.”

The right response is between those two. Take God’s correction seriously, but don’t lose hope. Repent quickly. Receive His forgiveness fully. Get back up and walk in obedience. *“Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet”* {Hebrews 12:12–13}.

King David is a powerful example. After his sin with Bathsheba, God sent the prophet Nathan to confront him {2 Samuel 12}. Nathan’s rebuke was direct: *“You are the man!”* {2 Samuel 12:7}. David didn’t despise it, and he didn’t faint under it. He said, *“I have sinned against the*

LORD” {2 Samuel 12:13}. And out of that moment came Psalm 51, one of the most beautiful prayers of repentance ever written.

The rebuke was painful. The consequences were real. But David was restored, and God still called him a man after His own heart {Acts 13:22}.

The love we need

We live in a culture that has confused love with the absence of correction. We have been told that if someone truly loves us, they will never tell us we are wrong. But that is not love. That is indifference wearing love’s clothes.

The love of God is better than that. It is a Father’s love. It sees where we are going, and it cares enough to stop us. It rebukes, it chastens, it trains, and it never lets us go.

“The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities… As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him” {Psalm 103:8–13}.

Examine Yourself

1. Which father in the opening story have you pictured God to be? Why?

2. Can you remember a time when God corrected you? Looking back, how did it “yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness” in your life?

3. When the Holy Spirit convicts you, are you more likely to despise it (shrug it off) or to be discouraged (collapse under it)? What would the right response look like?

4. Is there an area of your life right now where you sense God's correction? Take a few minutes to pray Psalm 51:10–12 over it.

CHAPTER SIX

Grace Is Not a License

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age."

{Titus 2:11–12}

If you have read this far, there may be a question rising in your mind. Maybe it has been there since the first chapter. *Isn't all this talk about commandments a step backward? Aren't we under grace now?*

It's a fair question, and it deserves a careful answer. Because grace is the heart of the gospel. Without grace, none of us would have any hope at all. And I never want to say anything that makes grace smaller than it is.

But I am convinced that much of the modern church has made grace smaller, not by preaching too little of it, but by preaching a version of it that the apostles would not recognize. We have made grace mean, "God doesn't care how you live." And that isn't grace. It is a counterfeit.

What grace is

The Greek word for grace is *charis*. It means favor, kindness, a gift that is freely given and not earned. Grace is God giving us what we could never deserve.

And grace is everything. We are saved by it: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast"* {Ephesians 2:8–9}. We stand in it {Romans 5:2}. We are justified by it {Romans 3:24}. There is nothing we bring to the table except our need.

I want to say that as strongly as I can, because the rest of this chapter depends on it. Nothing in this book is meant to suggest that we earn salvation by obedience. We don't. We can't. Grace is a gift.

But here is the question: a gift *for what?*

Read the very next verse after Ephesians 2:8–9, the one we almost never quote: *"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them"* {Ephesians 2:10}.

We are not saved *by* good works. But we are saved *for* good works. Grace doesn't end where obedience begins. Grace is what makes obedience possible.

Grace is a teacher

Our theme verse for this chapter, Titus 2:11–12, says something that surprises many people. It says grace *teaches* us.

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age."

The Greek word for "teaching" is *paideuō*. Does that look familiar? It comes from the same root as *paideia*, the word for the Father's child-training discipline we saw in Hebrews 12. Grace isn't just a pardon. It's a schoolteacher. It takes us by the hand and trains us.

And look at what grace teaches. It teaches us to say no: "denying ungodliness and worldly lusts." And it teaches us to say yes: to "live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age."

The grace that the modern church often preaches says, "You don't have to say no to anything." The grace that the Bible preaches teaches us to say no to sin.

Paul continues: *"...looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works"* {Titus 2:13–14}.

Why did Jesus give Himself for us? Two reasons, Paul says. To redeem us *from every lawless deed* (there is that word *anomia* again), and to purify for Himself a people *zealous for good works*. The cross was not only meant to get us out of hell. It was meant to get sin out of us.

“Shall we continue in sin?”

Paul preached grace so powerfully that some people misunderstood him. They said, in effect, “If God’s grace is greatest where sin is greatest, then let’s sin more so that God can show more grace!” Paul had heard this argument before, and he answered it head-on:

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?” {Romans 6:1–2}.

The phrase “Certainly not!” is *mē genoito* in Greek. It is the strongest way Paul could say no. Some translations render it “God forbid!” or “Absolutely not!” It is the kind of reaction you would have if someone suggested something unthinkable.

A few verses later, he asks a second version of the same question: *“What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!”* {Romans 6:15}.

Paul’s answer is that a person who has truly received grace has changed masters. *“Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?”* {Romans 6:16}. Grace doesn’t make us masterless. It sets us free from sin so we can become *“slaves of righteousness”* {Romans 6:18}.

What “not under law” means

Many people quote the phrase “not under law but under grace” {Romans 6:14} as if it meant God’s commandments no longer apply to us. But look at the whole verse:

"For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace" {Romans 6:14}.

Paul's point is not that grace lets us sin. His point is the opposite: grace breaks sin's power. Under the law alone, without the Spirit, a person could see what was right but had no power to do it. The law could show sin but could not defeat it. But under grace, sin no longer rules over us.

Paul says it again in Romans 8: *"For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit"* {Romans 8:3–4}.

Did you catch that? God sent His Son *"that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us."* Grace doesn't throw away the righteous requirement of God's law. Grace fulfills it in us, by the Spirit.

That is why Paul could also say, *"Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law"* {Romans 3:31}.

To be "under law" in Paul's sense is to try to be made right with God by our own law-keeping, and to live under the law's condemnation when we fail. Christ has set us free from that. But being free from the law's condemnation is not the same as being free from God's will. *"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit"* {Romans 8:1}.

Turning grace into a license

By the time Jude wrote his short letter near the end of the New Testament period, the misuse of grace had become a serious problem. He wrote:

"For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" {Jude 4}.

Notice how these men got in: they "crept in unnoticed." They didn't announce that they were against grace. They talked about grace all the time. But they turned it into *aselgeia*, translated "lewdness" or "licentiousness." It means unrestrained living, throwing off all moral limits.

And notice what Jude says this amounts to: they "deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ." They might not have denied Jesus with their lips. But by turning grace into permission to sin, they denied His lordship with their lives.

Peter warned about the same thing: *"As free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God"* {1 Peter 2:16}. And Paul: *"For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another"* {Galatians 5:13}.

The apostles all saw this danger coming. A gospel of grace without holiness is not a new idea. It's an old heresy with a fresh coat of paint.

Cheap grace

In the 1930s, a German pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer watched much of the church in his country make peace with evil. He later wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*, and in it he described something he called "cheap grace." In his words, cheap grace is grace we give ourselves. It is forgiveness without repentance, grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and becoming flesh in us.

Bonhoeffer contrasted it with "costly grace": grace that is costly because it cost God the life of His Son, and costly because it calls us to follow Him. It is grace because it is free, and costly because it claims our whole life. Bonhoeffer didn't just write about this. He lived it, and he was executed by the Nazis in April 1945 for his resistance to their regime.

Cheap grace is everywhere today. It says, "Jesus paid it all, so it doesn't matter what I do." But real grace says, "Jesus paid it all, so all that I am belongs to Him."

The power of grace

Here is the best part. Grace is not only God's favor toward us. It is also God's power at work in us.

When Paul begged God to remove his thorn in the flesh, God answered, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness"* {2 Corinthians 12:9}. Grace was the strength God gave Paul to endure.

And listen to how Paul described his own life and work: *"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly*

than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" {1 Corinthians 15:10}.

Grace didn't make Paul lazy. Grace made him work harder than anyone. But he knew it wasn't his own strength. It was grace working through him.

This is so freeing. Obedience is not something we have to manufacture in our own strength. God's grace that saved us is the same grace that empowers us to live for Him. We are called to a higher standard now than before we were saved, but we are also given a power we never had before.

Grace that changes a life

Let me give you a picture of real grace in action.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector in Jericho, and he was rich {Luke 19:2}. Tax collectors were known for cheating their own people to line their pockets. When Jesus came through town, Zacchaeus climbed a tree just to see Him. And Jesus stopped, looked up, called him by name, and invited Himself to his house {Luke 19:5}.

That is grace. Zacchaeus hadn't cleaned up his life. He hadn't made any promises. Jesus came to him first.

But look at what happened next. *"Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold'"* {Luke 19:8}.

Nobody told him he had to do that. Grace did it. When grace came into his house, it came into his wallet. It

changed the way he treated people. And Jesus said, *"Today salvation has come to this house"* {Luke 19:9}.

That is what real grace does. It finds us before we change, and then it changes us.

Faith that works

James, the brother of the Lord, put it in very practical terms. *"Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead"* {James 2:17}. And, *"But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?"* {James 2:20}.

Paul and James are not in conflict. Paul says we are saved by faith, not by works. James says the kind of faith that saves is never alone, because it always produces works. Paul is talking about the root. James is talking about the fruit. Paul himself said that what matters is *"faith working through love"* {Galatians 5:6}.

Grace saves us through faith. And that faith, if it is real, will work. It will love. It will obey.

Examine Yourself

1. Before reading this chapter, how would you have defined grace? Has your definition changed?

2. Titus 2:12 says grace teaches us to say no to ungodliness. What is grace teaching you to say no to in this season?

3. Have you ever used grace as an excuse? ("I'm under grace, so it doesn't matter.") Be honest with the Lord about it.

4. Read 1 Corinthians 15:10. Where do you need to stop relying on your own strength and start relying on God's grace to obey Him?

CHAPTER SEVEN

“This Is How God Made Me”

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God… That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

{John 3:3, 6–7}

There is a sentence I hear more and more, from people inside the church and outside of it. It usually comes at the end of a conversation about something God’s Word calls sin. And it is meant to end the conversation.

“This is just how God made me.”

Sometimes it comes in other forms. “I was born this way.” “This is who I am.” “I’ve always been like this.” “If God didn’t want me to feel this way, why would He make me like this?”

It is said about a hot temper. About a wandering eye. About a craving for alcohol or drugs. About a sharp tongue,

a jealous spirit, a love of money, or sexual desires that God's Word does not bless. The details change. The logic is always the same: *I have felt this way for as long as I can remember. It feels natural to me. So God must have made me this way. And if God made me this way, then it must be fine.*

I want to take that sentence seriously, because there is something true inside it. But the Bible draws exactly the opposite conclusion from that truth. And understanding why is one of the most important things a believer can know, because it takes us straight to the heart of the gospel.

What God made

Let's start at the beginning. When God finished creating the man and the woman, the Bible says, *"Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good"* {Genesis 1:31}.

God did not make anything broken. He did not make anything twisted. He did not create sin. Solomon put it plainly: *"Truly, this only I have found: that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes"* {Ecclesiastes 7:29}.

So whatever is wrong with us did not come from God's hand. It came from somewhere else.

What happened to us

It came from the fall. When Adam and Eve listened to the serpent and ate what God had forbidden, sin entered the human race, and it has been passed down ever since.

"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" {Romans 5:12}.

There is a quiet but devastating detail in Genesis 5. When God created Adam, He made him *"in the likeness of God"* {Genesis 5:1}. But just two verses later, after the fall, we read that Adam *"begot a son in his own likeness, after his image"* {Genesis 5:3}. Adam passed his own likeness on to his children: a fallen likeness. And every one of us has inherited it.

This is what theologians call the sinful nature, or original sin. Christians have discussed for centuries exactly *how* it is passed down. But the Bible is very clear *that* it is. We are not born neutral. We are not born as clean slates who later choose whether to sin. We are born with a nature that already leans away from God.

David said it in the psalm he wrote after his sin with Bathsheba: *"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me"* {Psalm 51:5}. David wasn't blaming his mother. He was confessing that his sin went all the way down, to the very beginning of his life. His adultery wasn't a strange accident. It grew from a root that had been there all along.

Paul says that before Christ, we *"were by nature children of wrath, just as the others"* {Ephesians 2:3}. Notice the words *by nature*. Not just by choice. By nature.

And God said of humanity after the flood, *"the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth"* {Genesis 8:21}.

Everyone has a bent

Here is where the sentence “This is how I was made” has something true in it. It is true that many of our desires and struggles have been with us as long as we can remember. It is true that we didn’t sit down one day and choose them. It is true that different people struggle with different things.

One person seems to have been born with a temper. Another has struggled with fear and anxiety for as long as she can remember. Another discovers the first time he takes a drink that something in him wants more and more. Another has always been drawn to lying, or to stealing, or to controlling other people. Another has sexual desires that he never asked for and doesn’t know what to do with. Another is quietly consumed with pride, envy, or greed, and looks perfectly respectable on the outside.

Science sometimes tells us that some of these tendencies run in families, or are shaped by our bodies, our temperaments, or what happened to us as children. The Bible isn’t surprised by that. It tells us that the fall didn’t only damage our souls. It brought brokenness into the whole creation, including our bodies {Romans 8:20–22}. We live in a world where everything has been bent by sin, and we have been bent by it too.

So yes, all of us come into this world with a predisposition toward some kind of sin. Your bent may not be the same as mine. But every one of us has one.

James describes how it works: *“But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and*

sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" {James 1:14–15}.

Notice the words *his own desires*. Temptation doesn't only come at us from the outside. It rises up from the inside. That is why sin so often feels natural. It feels natural because, in our fallen state, it *is* natural. It comes from the nature we were born with.

But natural is not the same as good. And it is certainly not the same as God's design.

The wrong conclusion

So here is the problem with "This is how God made me." It takes the fallen nature we inherited from Adam and calls it the good design of God. It looks at the damage sin has done to us and says, "God did this, so it must be right."

Think about what that would mean. If every desire I was born with is God's design, then the person born with a violent temper should be free to rage. The person with a bent toward addiction should be free to use. The person who has always been a liar should be free to lie. No one would actually accept that. We all know instinctively that "I've always been this way" does not make something right.

The Bible draws the opposite conclusion. It says: *You were born with a sinful nature. That is exactly why you cannot stay the way you were born.*

This is where lawless love does so much damage. Lawless love says, "God loves you just as you are, so stay just as you are." It sounds kind. But it leaves people trapped

in the very nature that is destroying them. It tells a drowning man that he looks comfortable in the water.

The love of God says something far better: "I love you just as you are, and I love you too much to leave you that way. You must be born again."

We are not born saved

Let me say this as plainly as I can, because so many people have never been told: **No one is born saved.**

We are not born Christians. We are not saved because our parents were believers, because we grew up in church, because we were baptized as babies, or because we are basically good people. John makes this clear in the opening chapter of his Gospel:

"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" {John 1:12–13}.

Not of blood. You don't become a child of God through your family line. *Not of the will of the flesh.* You can't make it happen through your own effort. *Not of the will of man.* No one else can do it for you. You must be born *of God*.

Paul says that all of us, without exception, start in the same place: *"There is none righteous, no, not one… for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* {Romans 3:10, 23}.

That is the bad news. And we have to hear the bad news, because without it the good news makes no sense. If I was

born fine, I don't need a Savior. If I was born good, I don't need to be born again. But if I was born in sin, then my greatest need is not to be affirmed. It is to be made new.

"You must be born again"

The most famous conversation about this subject happened at night, between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus {John 3:1–21}.

Nicodemus was not a drunk or a thief. He was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and a respected teacher of Israel {John 3:1, 10}. He was moral, religious, educated, and sincere. If anyone could have said, "I'm fine the way I am," it was Nicodemus.

And Jesus said to him: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"* {John 3:3}.

The Greek word translated "again" is *anōthen*. It can mean "again," but it can also mean "from above." Both meanings fit beautifully. We need a second birth, and it must come from above, from God Himself.

Then Jesus explained why: *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit"* {John 3:6}.

That one sentence answers "This is how God made me." Your first birth gave you a human nature descended from Adam. Flesh gives birth to flesh. You can educate it, discipline it, dress it up, and take it to church, but it is still flesh. It cannot produce a new heart. Only the Spirit of God can give birth to a new nature.

And then Jesus said, *"Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again'"* {John 3:7}. Not "you might want to consider it." *You must.*

If a moral, religious teacher like Nicodemus had to be born again, then so do we. Our first birth, the one we didn't choose, gave us a nature that leans toward sin. That is exactly why God offers a second birth.

What the new birth does

So what happens when a person is born again? The Bible uses several powerful pictures.

A new heart. God promised through Ezekiel, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh"* {Ezekiel 36:26}.

A new creation. *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new"* {2 Corinthians 5:17}.

A new nature. Peter says that through God's promises we *"may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust"* {2 Peter 1:4}.

A new seed. *"Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever"* {1 Peter 1:23}.

A washing. God saved us *"through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit"* {Titus 3:5}.

And here is the most beautiful part: the new birth gives us a new identity. We are no longer defined by the nature we were born with. Paul wrote to the Corinthians after listing many kinds of sin: sexual sins, idolatry, theft, greed, drunkenness, slander, and swindling {1 Corinthians 6:9–10}. Then he said:

"And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" {1 Corinthians 6:11}.

Such were some of you. Past tense. The church in Corinth was full of people who had once been defined by those sins. But they had been washed. Their old identity was not who they were anymore.

That is the answer to "This is who I am." In Christ, it is who you *were*.

The struggle doesn't always disappear overnight

I need to be honest here, because I don't want to give anyone a false picture. Being born again does not always mean that every old desire disappears the moment we believe. Sometimes God does deliver people instantly, and we praise Him for that. But for many believers, the old desires still pull, sometimes for years.

Paul describes this battle: *"For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another"* {Galatians 5:17}. The born-again believer still lives in a body that hasn't yet been fully

redeemed {Romans 8:23}. The old nature has been crucified with Christ {Romans 6:6}, but we must keep putting it off and putting on the new {Ephesians 4:22–24}.

Here is what changes. Before the new birth, those desires were our master, and we had no power to say no. After the new birth, we have a new nature, the Holy Spirit living inside us, and real power to resist. *"Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh"* {Galatians 5:16}.

And please hear this: **being tempted is not the same as sinning.** Jesus Himself *"was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin"* {Hebrews 4:15}. Having a desire you didn't ask for is not the sin. The sin is when we welcome it, feed it, act on it, or call it good. If you are a believer who still feels the pull of an old desire, you are not a failure and you are not alone. You are in a battle, and *"God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape"* {1 Corinthians 10:13}.

The difference between the believer and the person who says "This is how God made me" is not that one has desires and the other doesn't. It is that one fights them in the power of the Spirit, and the other has made peace with them and called them God's design.

A word about how we speak

Before we close this chapter, we need a word about how we judge. We will look at that closely in Part Three, but it matters here too.

It is very easy to talk about "This is how God made me" as if it only applied to *other people's* sins. But every one of us was born with a bent. The church has sometimes treated certain sins as uniquely shameful while quietly excusing its own gossip, gluttony, pride, greed, and bitterness. That is the plank and the speck all over again {Matthew 7:3–5}.

So when we speak to someone who says, "This is how I was made," we don't speak as people who were born better. We speak as people who were born in exactly the same condition, and who have been rescued by exactly the same grace. We were not born saved either. We needed the new birth just as much as anyone else.

That changes our tone. It makes us humble. It makes us patient. But it doesn't make us silent. Because the most loving thing we can tell anyone, including ourselves, is not "Stay as you are." It is the same thing Jesus told Nicodemus: *"You must be born again."*

And the good news is that you *can* be.

Examine Yourself

1. Have you ever said, or thought, "This is just how I am" about something God's Word calls sin? What was it?

2. What is your own "bent," the sin you seem to have struggled with for as long as you can remember? Have you brought it honestly to God?

3. Read John 3:1–21. Why do you think Jesus told a moral, religious man like Nicodemus that he must be born again? What does that mean for you?

4. Read 1 Corinthians 6:9–11. If you are in Christ, what does “such were some of you” mean for the way you see yourself today?

Part Three: Judge Not?

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Most Quoted Verse

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you."

{Matthew 7:1–2}

Two men walk up the steps of the temple in Jerusalem to pray.

The first is a Pharisee. Everyone knows him. He is respected, disciplined, and devout. He fasts twice a week. He tithes on everything, down to the herbs in his garden. He finds a prominent place to stand, lifts his face toward heaven, and begins to pray, loud enough to be overheard:

"God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector" {Luke 18:11}.

Because there, at a distance, is the second man. A tax collector. A man who works for Rome and squeezes his own people for money. Everyone knows him too, and nobody likes him.

He doesn’t go to the front. He stands far off. He won’t even lift his eyes toward heaven. He beats his chest and says only this:

“God, be merciful to me a sinner!” {Luke 18:13}.

Jesus told this story, and Luke tells us exactly who He was aiming it at: *“some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others”* {Luke 18:9}. And then Jesus gave His verdict, one that must have shocked everyone listening:

“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” {Luke 18:14}.

Hold on to those two men. We are going to come back to them at the end of this chapter, because between them, they explain the most quoted, and most misunderstood, verse in the Bible.

The verse everyone knows

There was a time when the most famous verse in the Bible was John 3:16. I’m not sure that’s true anymore. Today, the verse people seem to know best, inside the church and out, is Matthew 7:1: “Judge not.”

It is quoted by people who believe the Bible and by people who reject it. It is quoted by people who have never read another word of the Sermon on the Mount. It is used to end conversations, to silence disagreement, and to shut down any suggestion that something might be wrong.

And here is the irony. The person who quotes “Judge not” is usually making a judgment. They have decided that you are being judgmental. They have concluded that what you said was wrong. Nobody actually lives as if “Judge not” meant “Never say anything is wrong.” It’s impossible. We all make judgments every day.

So what did Jesus actually mean?

A hillside in Galilee

To find out, we have to go to where He said it.

Picture a hillside near the Sea of Galilee. Crowds have come from all over: Galilee, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan {Matthew 4:25}. Jesus sits down, as teachers did in those days, and His disciples gather close. And He begins to teach {Matthew 5:1–2}.

What follows, in Matthew 5 through 7, is the longest single sermon of Jesus in the Gospels. And it is not a soft sermon.

In this same message, Jesus says He did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them {Matthew 5:17}. He says that whoever breaks one of the least of the commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom {5:19}. He says our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees {5:20}.

He says that anger is murder in the heart {5:21–22} and that lust is adultery in the heart {5:27–28}. He says that if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out {5:29}. And near the end, He says the way to life is narrow and few find

it {7:13–14}, and that not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom {7:21}.

Now think about this. In the middle of a sermon where Jesus calls sin sin more deeply and more searchingly than anyone ever had, does it make any sense that He suddenly stops and says, “But never tell anyone they are wrong”?

Of course not. Whatever “Judge not” means, it can’t mean that.

What the word means

The Greek word for “judge” is *krinō*. Like our English word, it has a wide range of meanings. It can mean to distinguish or evaluate, to form an opinion, to decide, or to condemn and pass sentence.

Sometimes it’s used in a good sense. Jesus told Simon the Pharisee, *“You have rightly judged”* {Luke 7:43}. He asked the crowds, *“Why, even of yourselves, do you not judge what is right?”* {Luke 12:57}. Paul told the Corinthians, *“Judge for yourselves what I say”* {1 Corinthians 10:15}.

Sometimes it’s used in a negative sense: harsh fault-finding, condemnation, sitting in a seat that belongs to God alone.

So we can’t simply look at the word and decide what Jesus meant. We have to keep reading.

A man with a beam in his eye

Here is the whole passage:

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" {Matthew 7:1–5}.

The moment you read verses 3 through 5, the meaning comes into focus. Jesus is describing a person obsessed with a tiny fault in someone else while ignoring an enormous one in himself.

The "speck" is *karphos*: a splinter, a bit of straw, a speck of sawdust. The "plank" is *dokos*: a beam, the kind of heavy timber that holds up a roof. Jesus grew up in a carpenter's home {Matthew 13:55}. He knew exactly what a beam was, and exactly how ridiculous this picture would be.

Imagine it. A man with a roof beam sticking out of his eye, squinting and leaning in close to his brother: "Hold still. I think I see a little something in there."

The crowd on that hillside would have laughed. And then, one by one, they would have stopped laughing, because they would have recognized themselves.

And Jesus had a word for that man: *"Hypocrite!"* The Greek word *hypokritēs* originally meant a stage actor, someone who wore a mask and played a part. A hypocrite

plays the role of the righteous man while his own heart and life are full of sin.

That is the Pharisee in the temple. Head high. Voice loud. Eyes fixed on the tax collector's sins. Completely blind to his own pride.

What Jesus actually told him to do

Now look closely at what Jesus told the man with the beam. He did *not* say, "Leave your brother's speck alone. It's none of your business." He said:

"First remove the plank from your own eye, and ***then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye****"* {Matthew 7:5}.

Read that again. Jesus *expects* us to help our brother with his speck. That is where the whole passage is headed. But there is an order. First, deal honestly with your own sin. Then, with clear eyes and a humble heart, you will be able to help.

Think about the eye. It is one of the most sensitive parts of the body. If someone is going to take a splinter out of your eye, you want them to have clear vision, steady hands, and a very gentle touch. The last person you want poking around in there is a man with a beam in his own.

So "Judge not" does not mean "never help anyone see their sin." It means, "Don't be a hypocrite about it. Look at yourself first. Then help, gently."

The measuring cup

In verse 2, Jesus gives a principle that should make all of us careful: *"For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you."*

Picture a merchant in the marketplace measuring out grain. If he uses a generous scoop with his customers, he will get a generous scoop in return. If he uses a stingy, crooked measure, that is exactly what he will receive.

If I judge others harshly, without mercy, holding them to standards I don't keep myself, God will hold me to that same standard. James says it plainly: *"For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment"* {James 2:13}.

Luke's account of this teaching helps us feel its spirit. It comes right after Jesus tells His followers to love their enemies:

"Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you" {Luke 6:36–38}.

In Luke, "judge not" sits beside "condemn not," and right across from "forgive" and "give." Jesus is describing a heart: merciful, forgiving, generous, the opposite of the Pharisee's critical, superior spirit that looks for faults in others and delights in pronouncing sentence.

Keep reading

And then, in the very next breath after "Judge not," Jesus says something that most people who quote Matthew 7:1 have never noticed:

"Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces" {Matthew 7:6}.

How can you obey that without making a judgment? You have to discern who is treating holy things like dogs and pigs would. Immediately after "Judge not," Jesus requires His followers to use discernment.

A few verses later, He goes further:

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits" {Matthew 7:15–16}.

You cannot beware of false prophets unless you are willing to evaluate what they teach and how they live. Jesus commands it. We will look at that more closely in Chapter 10.

"Let him who is without sin…"

There is another scene people often use the same way.

Early one morning, Jesus is teaching in the temple courts when a group of scribes and Pharisees push their way through the crowd, dragging a woman. They throw her down in front of Him. *"Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law,*

commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" {John 8:4–5}.

John tells us why they asked: *"This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him"* {John 8:6}.

Jesus stoops down and writes on the ground with His finger. They keep pressing. Finally He stands up and says, *"He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first"* {John 8:7}. Then He stoops down and writes again. And one by one, from the oldest to the youngest, they drop their stones and walk away.

Before we go further, I should be honest with you about something. This story (John 7:53–8:11) is not found in the earliest Greek manuscripts of John's Gospel. In some later manuscripts it appears in different places, and a few even place it in Luke. That is why many Bibles, including the NKJV, set it apart with a note. Many scholars believe it is a true account from Jesus' ministry that was handed down and later included here. I mention it because a Berean reader deserves to know it, and because nothing we draw from this story rests on it alone. Everything Jesus says here, both the mercy and the call to leave sin behind, He says plainly in other places {John 3:17; 5:14; Luke 7:47–50}.

Now, notice a few things about this scene. These men were not seeking justice. They were using a woman as bait to trap Jesus. And the Law required that *both* the man and the woman be put to death {Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22}. She had been caught "in the very act" {John 8:4}, so the man was there too. Where was he? These men weren't upholding God's Law. They were twisting it. They

were exactly the hypocrites with beams in their eyes that Jesus described in Matthew 7.

And then look at what happens when they are gone:

"Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" {John 8:10–11}.

We love the first half of that sentence. We often forget the second.

Jesus did not condemn her. But He also did not tell her that what she had done was fine. He called it what it was, sin, and told her to leave it behind.

"Neither do I condemn you" is grace. "Go and sin no more" is the love that changes us. Jesus said both. If we only say one, we are not speaking like Jesus.

What Jesus forbade

So let's gather together what Jesus was forbidding when He said, "Judge not."

- **Hypocritical judgment.** Pointing out someone else's sin while ignoring or excusing our own {Matthew 7:3–5; Romans 2:1}.
- **Harsh, merciless judgment.** A critical spirit that looks for faults, assumes the worst, and shows no mercy {Luke 6:36–37; James 2:13}.

- **Condemning judgment.** Pronouncing final sentence on someone's soul, a seat that belongs to God alone {James 4:12}.
- **Self-exalting judgment.** Judging others to feel superior, like the Pharisee who prayed, *"God, I thank You that I am not like other men"* {Luke 18:11}.

Paul echoes Jesus: *"Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things"* {Romans 2:1}. Notice the last phrase. The problem is the person who condemns others for the very sins he is committing.

And James says, *"There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?"* {James 4:12}. The context there is believers speaking evil of one another {James 4:11}. James is warning against slander, and against making ourselves the final judge over our brother.

What Jesus did not forbid

And here is what Jesus did *not* forbid:

- He did not forbid calling sin what God calls it.
- He did not forbid helping a brother see his sin, once we have dealt with our own.
- He did not forbid discernment about who will receive holy things {Matthew 7:6}.

- He did not forbid evaluating teachers and prophets by their fruits {Matthew 7:15–20}.

In fact, He commanded every one of these.

The church today tends to make one of two mistakes. Some believers are harsh, critical, and hypocritical. They have beams in their eyes and are digging hard for specks in everyone else's. Matthew 7:1–5 is for them.

But many others have made the opposite mistake. They have heard "Judge not" and concluded that they can never say anything is wrong. They are afraid to speak. They watch brothers and sisters walk toward destruction and say nothing, because they don't want to be "judgmental."

Both mistakes are failures of love. The first lacks mercy. The second lacks courage.

Back to the temple

So let's go back to those two men in the temple.

The Pharisee is the picture of everything Jesus forbade when He said, "Judge not." He looked down on another man. He measured himself against someone else's sins instead of God's holiness. He had a beam in his eye the size of a roof timber, and he couldn't see it at all.

But look closely at the tax collector, because this is the part we usually miss.

The tax collector did not say, “Who’s to say what’s right or wrong?” He did not say, “God made me this way.” He did not say, “Don’t judge me.” He looked at his own life, called his sin exactly what it was, and cried out for mercy: *“God, be merciful to me a sinner!”*

He made a judgment. A true one. And he made it about himself first.

That is where righteous judgment always begins. Not by pretending sin doesn’t exist, and not by pointing at someone else’s, but by standing far off, beating our own chest, and agreeing with God about our own hearts. That is how the beam comes out of our eye.

And once it does, something wonderful happens. We can finally see clearly. Not to look down on our brother, but to kneel beside him, gently, as one sinner who has received mercy helping another sinner find it too.

The Pharisee went home with his reputation. The tax collector went home justified.

Jesus never told us to stop seeing sin. He told us to start seeing it in the mirror.

Examine Yourself

1. When have you heard “Judge not” quoted, or quoted it yourself? What was it being used to mean?
2. Read Luke 18:9–14. Which man in the temple do you resemble more often? Be honest.

3. Is there a “plank” in your own eye that you need to deal with before you can see clearly? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you.

4. Which mistake are you more prone to: being harsh and critical, or being silent when you should speak? What would it look like to move toward the balance Jesus describes?

CHAPTER NINE

Judge Righteous Judgment

"Do not judge according to appearance,
but judge with righteous judgment."

{John 7:24}

Jerusalem is overflowing.

It is the Feast of Tabernacles, the most joyful festival of the year. Families from all over the land have poured into the city and built little shelters out of branches on rooftops and in courtyards, remembering the years their ancestors lived in tents in the wilderness. There is singing in the streets. The temple courts are packed.

And everyone is talking about one Man.

John tells us the crowd was buzzing with whispers. *"Some said, 'He is good'; others said, 'No, on the contrary, He deceives the people'"* {John 7:12}. Some said He was a prophet. Some said He was the Christ. Others said He couldn't possibly be, because everyone knew where He came from. And the religious leaders were furious with Him, because a while earlier He had healed a crippled man on the Sabbath {John 5:1–16}.

In the middle of the feast, Jesus walks into the temple and begins to teach. And in the middle of all that noise, all those opinions, all those verdicts being whispered from one person to the next, He says this:

"Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" {John 7:24}.

If Matthew 7:1, "Judge not," is the most quoted verse in the Bible, this may be one of the least quoted. And yet it came from the same lips.

Read it again. Jesus didn't say, "Don't judge." He said, "Don't judge *this way*. Judge *that way*." Set right beside "do not judge," the second "judge" is plainly an instruction. Jesus doesn't merely allow righteous judgment. He commands it.

So was Jesus contradicting Himself when He said "Judge not" in Matthew 7? Of course not. He was teaching us that there are two kinds of judgment. One He forbids. The other He requires. And learning the difference is part of growing up as a believer.

The rest of John 7 shows us both kinds in action.

What the eye sees

The phrase "according to appearance" is *kat' opsin* in Greek. It literally means "according to what the eye sees." It's judging by the surface.

The religious leaders looked at the surface of what Jesus had done. *He healed on the Sabbath. That looks like work.*

Therefore He broke the Law. Therefore He can't be from God. Case closed.

Jesus answered them with their own practice. The Law required a baby boy to be circumcised on the eighth day. If that day fell on the Sabbath, they did it anyway, so that the Law of Moses wouldn't be broken. *"Are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?"* {John 7:23}.

In other words: *You haven't thought this through. You've looked at the outside and reached a verdict, without looking carefully at what God's Word actually says or at what God is actually doing.*

We all do this. We judge people by how they dress, how they talk, where they're from, what they drive, or what group they belong to. James warned the church about exactly this: rolling out the red carpet for the rich man in fine clothes and telling the poor man in shabby clothes to sit on the floor. *"Have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?"* {James 2:4}.

Even the prophet Samuel fell into it. When God sent him to anoint a new king from among Jesse's sons, Samuel took one look at the oldest, tall and impressive Eliab, and thought, *Surely this is the one.* But God said, *"Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature… For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart"* {1 Samuel 16:7}. The king God chose was the youngest son, the one nobody even thought to invite. He was out in the fields with the sheep.

Judging by appearance is shallow. It is often unfair. And it is very often wrong.

“Search and look”

Now watch what happens next in John 7, because it is one of the clearest pictures in the Bible of both kinds of judgment, side by side.

The chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest Jesus. But the officers came back empty-handed. When the leaders demanded to know why, the officers could only say, *“No man ever spoke like this Man!”* {John 7:46}.

The leaders were livid. *“Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed”* {John 7:47–49}.

And then one of their own spoke up. Nicodemus, the same man who had come to Jesus by night {John 3:1–2}, asked a simple question:

“Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?” {John 7:51}.

That is righteous judgment. Nicodemus wasn’t saying, “We shouldn’t evaluate this Man.” He was saying, “We should evaluate Him *rightly*. Let’s hear Him. Let’s get the facts. Let’s do what God’s Law requires.”

And how did the others respond? With mockery and a quick verdict: *“Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee”* {John 7:52}.

Do you see the irony? They told Nicodemus to "search and look," but they hadn't searched very carefully themselves. The prophet Jonah came from Gath Hepher, a town in Galilee {2 Kings 14:25}. And Isaiah had prophesied that a great light would shine in *"Galilee of the Gentiles"* {Isaiah 9:1–2}, a prophecy Matthew tells us Jesus fulfilled {Matthew 4:12–16}. On top of that, Jesus wasn't even born in Galilee. He was born in Bethlehem, exactly where the Messiah was supposed to be born {Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1}. They simply never asked.

They judged by what the eye could see: *He's from Galilee.* And they were completely wrong.

That is what judging according to appearance looks like. And Nicodemus, quietly asking for a fair hearing, is what righteous judgment looks like.

Righteous judgment in the Law

Nicodemus wasn't inventing anything new. Righteous judgment runs all through the Law of Moses.

"You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor" {Leviticus 19:15}.

Notice: God *commanded* His people to judge their neighbor. But to do it in righteousness. Not tilted toward the rich. Not tilted toward the poor. Not swayed by appearances, bribes, or popularity. Just.

Moses told the judges of Israel, *"You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small as well as*

the great; you shall not be afraid in any man's presence, for the judgment is God's" {Deuteronomy 1:17}.

That last phrase is the key to everything: *"the judgment is God's."* When God's people judge rightly, they aren't setting up their own standard. They are simply agreeing with what God has already said.

Two kinds of judging

So how do we tell the two kinds apart? Let me put it as simply as I can.

Forbidden judgment is based on my standards, my preferences, or my traditions. **Righteous judgment** is based on God's Word.

Forbidden judgment looks at the surface. **Righteous judgment** looks carefully at the truth.

Forbidden judgment tries to read hidden motives and pronounce on what is in someone else's heart. **Righteous judgment** evaluates what can be seen and heard: words, actions, teachings, and fruit.

Forbidden judgment is hypocritical, ignoring the plank in my own eye. **Righteous judgment** begins with me.

Forbidden judgment aims to condemn, shame, or make me feel superior. **Righteous judgment** aims to protect, restore, and honor God.

Forbidden judgment pronounces final sentence on someone's eternal destiny. **Righteous judgment** leaves that to God, while still calling sin what God calls it.

Let’s walk through these.

Whose standard?

The first and biggest difference is the standard. Righteous judgment always measures by God’s Word, not by personal opinion.

Jesus said something remarkable about this: *“He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day”* {John 12:48}.

In the end, God’s Word is the Judge. When I say something is sin because God’s Word clearly says so, I’m not really the one judging. I’m just reading the verdict the Judge has already written. But when I condemn someone for something God’s Word doesn’t condemn, just because it doesn’t fit my preferences or my church’s culture, I have made myself a lawgiver. And James reminds us, *“There is one Lawgiver”* {James 4:12}.

This is what Romans 14 is about. Paul wrote to believers who were looking down on each other over what he called *“doubtful things”* {Romans 14:1}, areas where sincere Christians, each trying to honor the Lord, had reached different convictions. And Paul said, *“Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls”* {Romans 14:4}.

Romans 14 is not about things God’s Word plainly calls sin. Paul was never relaxed about those. In the very same letter, he lists sins clearly and warns that *“those who practice such things are deserving of death”* {Romans

1:32}. Romans 14 is about the gray areas, where we must not make our own conscience the rule for everyone else.

Righteous judgment knows the difference between “God has said” and “I prefer.”

Get the facts

Nicodemus asked, *“Does our law judge a man before it hears him?”* That one question would prevent an enormous amount of damage in our day.

Imagine a ten-second video that shows up on your phone. A man is shouting at a store clerk. He looks red-faced and furious. Within hours, the clip has a million views. People are posting his name, his workplace, and what they think of him. By the next morning, he has lost his job.

Then the full video comes out. The clerk had been mocking the man’s disabled son for twenty minutes before the clip begins.

That is judging according to appearance. And our culture does it at the speed of a thumb.

The Bible has been warning us about this for three thousand years:

“He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” {Proverbs 18:13}.

“The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him” {Proverbs 18:17}.

God's Law required two or three witnesses before a person could be convicted {Deuteronomy 19:15}, and Jesus and Paul both carried that principle into the church {Matthew 18:16; 1 Timothy 5:19}. It is a safeguard against rumor, gossip, and hasty conclusions.

Believers should be the slowest people on earth to condemn on appearances. We should be the ones who say, "Wait. Let's find out what really happened," and who refuse to pass along what we don't know to be true.

Fruit, not hidden motives

Paul wrote, *"Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts"* {1 Corinthians 4:5}.

There are things we simply cannot see. We can't see another person's motives. We don't know everything happening inside them, or everything God is doing in them behind the scenes. Those "counsels of the hearts" belong to God.

But in the very next chapter of that same letter, Paul tells the Corinthians that they *must* deal with a man who was openly living in sexual sin {1 Corinthians 5:1–5}. Why the difference? Because that wasn't a hidden motive. It was a visible, ongoing behavior that God's Word clearly called sin.

So here is the principle: we don't judge what we cannot see. But we do evaluate what God has made plain. Jesus said, *"You will know them by their fruits"* {Matthew 7:16}. Fruit is visible. Hearts belong to God.

Inside and outside

Paul made one more distinction that helps enormously:

"For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges" {1 Corinthians 5:12–13}.

The church is not called to police the world. We shouldn't expect people who don't know Christ to live as though they do. That doesn't mean we stop telling the world the truth. The gospel itself says that *"all have sinned"* {Romans 3:23} and that God *"now commands all men everywhere to repent"* {Acts 17:30}. But toward unbelievers, we come as messengers carrying an invitation, not as judges passing sentence.

Within the church, though, Paul says we *are* to judge. We are responsible for one another. When someone who calls himself a brother is living in open, unrepentant sin, the church is not supposed to shrug and say, "Judge not." We will look closely at how God tells His church to handle that, and why, in Chapter 15.

Isn't it striking that we often have it backward? We are quick to condemn the world and slow to address sin among ourselves. Paul told us to do the opposite.

Discernment is a sign of maturity

Here is something that may change the way you think about judgment entirely. The Bible treats discernment as a sign of spiritual maturity.

"But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" {Hebrews 5:14}.

The word "discern" is *diakrisis*, from the same root as *krinō*, "to judge." Mature believers have trained their senses, through practice, to tell good from evil.

Think about a toddler. A toddler will put anything in his mouth: a crayon, a coin, a bug. He can't tell what is food and what is poison. Growing up means learning the difference. And a grown-up who still can't tell the difference isn't being open-minded. He's in danger.

Paul said, *"But he who is spiritual judges all things"* {1 Corinthians 2:15}. The word is *anakrinō*, to examine closely. A spiritual person isn't someone who never evaluates anything. A spiritual person evaluates everything by the Spirit and the Word.

And here is a prayer of Paul's that brings love and discernment together beautifully:

"And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ" {Philippians 1:9–10}.

Paul doesn't pray that their love will grow so big that they stop discerning. He prays that their love will grow *in* discernment. Real love is not blind. It has its eyes wide open.

What happens when a church stops judging

When a church stops exercising righteous judgment, something dangerous happens. Slowly, it loses the ability to tell good from evil. And eventually it starts calling them by each other's names.

"Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness" {Isaiah 5:20}.

A church that cannot say "this is wrong" will soon find itself saying "this is right" about the very things God calls wrong. And it will call that love.

But love *"rejoices in the truth"* {1 Corinthians 13:6}.

The man who asked for a fair hearing

Let's go back to Nicodemus one last time.

When he asked for a fair hearing, the other leaders mocked him. He had to stand alone in a room full of powerful men who had already made up their minds.

But John tells us how his story ends. After the crucifixion, when most of Jesus' own disciples had scattered, two men came to take His body down from the cross. One was Joseph of Arimathea. And the other was Nicodemus, *"bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds"* {John 19:39}. That was an extraordinary amount, the kind of burial spices given to a king.

The men who judged by appearance looked at Jesus and saw a troublemaker from Galilee. The man who insisted on hearing Him first ended up honoring Him as a King.

That is the difference righteous judgment makes. It doesn't make us harsher. It makes us see clearly. And when we see clearly, we see Him.

Examine Yourself

1. Before reading this chapter, did you know that Jesus commanded us to "judge with righteous judgment"? How does that change your understanding of "Judge not"?

2. The leaders dismissed Jesus because He was "from Galilee." Think of a time you judged someone by appearance and got it wrong. What did you miss?

3. Have you ever passed along something about someone before you knew the full story? What would it look like to follow Nicodemus' question, "Does our law judge a man before it hears him?"

4. Pray Philippians 1:9–10 for yourself this week, asking God to make your love grow in knowledge and all discernment.

CHAPTER TEN

By Their Fruits

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

{1 John 4:1}

It is one of the great ironies of the New Testament that the apostle of love is also the apostle of testing.

John, who wrote “God is love,” also wrote “do not believe every spirit.” In fact, he wrote them in the same chapter. Verse 1 of 1 John 4 tells us to test the spirits. Verse 8 tells us that God is love. John didn’t see any conflict between the two. To him, love and discernment were partners.

We have already seen that Jesus forbade hypocritical judgment and commanded righteous judgment. In this chapter, we will look at one of the most important areas where righteous judgment is required: testing what we hear, whether it comes from a pulpit, a podcast, a best-selling book, or our own hearts.

Testing like a goldsmith

The Greek word John uses for "test" is *dokimazō*. It was used for testing metals, especially gold and silver, to see whether they were genuine. A goldsmith would put a sample in the fire to see what was real and what was impurity. The same word is used in 1 Peter 1:7 for the testing of our faith, *"though it is tested by fire."*

Paul uses the same word in 1 Thessalonians 5:21: *"Test all things; hold fast what is good."* Notice: not "reject all things" and not "accept all things," but test all things. Keep what is good. Let go of what isn't.

That is not a suspicious, cynical spirit. It is the careful spirit of someone who knows that counterfeit gold exists, and who loves the real thing too much to be fooled.

Why God allows false teachers

Have you ever wondered why God allows false teachers to exist at all? Moses gave an answer that I find both sobering and beautiful:

"If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods'—which you have not known —'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, ***for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*** *You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him"* {Deuteronomy 13:1–4}.

Read that carefully. Even if a prophet performs a real sign, even if his prediction comes true, if he leads people away from the true God and His commandments, they are not to follow him. And why does God allow such a person to arise? *"The LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God."*

There is our theme again. False teaching is a test of love. And how does Moses describe the love that passes the test? *"You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice."*

The person who loves God and keeps His commandments has a built-in protection against deception. When a teacher comes along with impressive signs but leads away from what God has said, the one who loves God's Word will notice. As the psalmist said, *"Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble"* {Psalm 119:165}.

But the person who has been taught that love has nothing to do with God's commandments has no such protection. If love is only a feeling, then whatever feels loving will seem true.

Sheep's clothing

Jesus gave the most famous test of all in the Sermon on the Mount, just a few verses after "Judge not":

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree

bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit… Therefore by their fruits you will know them" {Matthew 7:15–17, 20}.

Notice the costume. False prophets don't come dressed as wolves. They come in sheep's clothing. They look like members of the flock. They use the right words. They may be warm, likable, and very sincere.

That is why Jesus doesn't tell us to judge by appearance. Wool is easy to put on. He tells us to look at fruit. Fruit takes time to grow, and it can't be faked forever.

And then, immediately after the fruit test, Jesus says this:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" {Matthew 7:21–23}.

These people had impressive ministries. Prophecy. Deliverance. Miracles. But Jesus says He never knew them, and He describes them with one word: *anomia*, lawlessness. Their ministry was full of power but empty of obedience.

The fruit Jesus is looking for is not spiritual fireworks. It is doing the will of the Father.

What fruit should we look for?

So what kind of fruit should we be examining? Scripture gives us several kinds.

The fruit of their doctrine. What do they teach about Jesus? John says that every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God {1 John 4:2–3}. Paul says that anyone who preaches a different gospel is accursed {Galatians 1:8–9}. Isaiah gave Israel a simple rule: *"To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them"* {Isaiah 8:20}. Does what they teach agree with all of Scripture, or only with the parts they like?

The fruit of their character. Paul lists the works of the flesh: *"adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like"* {Galatians 5:19–21}. And then he lists the fruit of the Spirit: *"love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control"* {Galatians 5:22–23}. Over time, which one shows up in this person's life?

The fruit of their lifestyle. When Paul listed the qualifications for church leaders, nearly all of them were about character and conduct, not giftedness: blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous, one who rules his own house well {1 Timothy 3:2–4}. The church today often chooses leaders by charisma. Paul chose them by fruit.

The fruit in their followers. What kind of people does this teaching produce? Peter warned about false teachers who would *"secretly bring in destructive heresies"* and said, *"many will follow their destructive ways"* {2 Peter 2:1–2}. He gave one of their marks: *"While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption"* {2 Peter 2:19}. Does this teaching produce people who are growing in holiness, humility, and love for God's Word? Or people who are growing more comfortable with sin, more devoted to the teacher, and more resistant to correction?

Testing the message of love

Now let's apply this to the subject of this book.

Many voices today preach a message of love. And love is a beautiful, biblical message. But we are commanded to test every message, including messages about love. So here are some questions to ask.

Does this message about love agree with how John defined love: *"that we keep His commandments"* {1 John 5:3}? Or does it define love as acceptance without change?

Does it include the love that corrects {Hebrews 12:6}, or only the love that comforts?

Does it teach grace that trains us to say no to ungodliness {Titus 2:12}, or grace that excuses it?

Does it lead people to repentance, or does it tell them they have nothing to repent of?

Does it produce people who love God's Word more, or people who need it less?

Peter said these false teachers *"promise them liberty."* That is often what counterfeit love sounds like. It promises freedom: freedom from rules, from guilt, from anyone telling you what to do. But Jesus said that the truth is what sets us free {John 8:32}, and that whoever commits sin is a slave of sin {John 8:34}. A message that promises freedom while leading people deeper into sin is not offering liberty. It is offering chains.

Testing ourselves first

All of this testing must begin at home. Remember the plank and the speck.

Paul wrote, *"Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves"* {2 Corinthians 13:5}. The word "test" there is *dokimazō* again, the same goldsmith's word. Before I test anyone else, I need to put my own heart in the fire.

What is the fruit of my life? What does my doctrine look like when it is tested against all of Scripture? What does my character look like when no one is watching? What kind of influence am I having on the people around me?

This is not meant to make us anxious. It is meant to keep us honest. The person who is quick to test others but never tests himself has missed the whole point of Matthew 7.

Discernment without love

There is one more warning we need before we leave this chapter, because it is possible to go wrong in the other direction.

In Revelation 2, Jesus wrote to the church at Ephesus. And He commended them for exactly the kind of discernment we have been talking about: *"I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars"* {Revelation 2:2}.

They had done the hard work of testing teachers. They had found false apostles and refused them. Jesus praised them for it.

But then He said: *"Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works"* {Revelation 2:4–5}.

The Ephesians were sound in doctrine and sharp in discernment, but they had lost their love. And Jesus took that so seriously that He warned He would remove their lampstand if they didn't repent {Revelation 2:5}.

This is the balance of the whole Bible. Love without discernment becomes gullible and sentimental. It accepts everything and protects no one. But discernment without love becomes cold, harsh, and proud. It can identify every false teacher and still have no heart for God or for people.

God wants both. He wants us to love Him so much that we can tell what is false, and to stay so close to Him that our discernment never turns cold.

Patience in the harvest

One last thing. Testing fruit takes time. Fruit doesn't appear overnight. A young believer, or someone going through a hard season, may not look like much right now. Jesus told a parable about a fig tree that hadn't borne fruit for three years, and the gardener asked for one more year to dig around it and fertilize it {Luke 13:6–9}.

So while we test what we hear carefully, we should be patient and gracious with people, especially those who are new, weak, or struggling. Our goal is not to catch people. It is to protect the flock and help each other grow.

"And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire" {Jude 22–23}.

Notice that phrase: *"making a distinction."* That is discernment. And it is in the service of compassion and rescue.

Examine Yourself

1. Deuteronomy 13:3 says God allows false teaching to test whether we love Him. How does loving God's commandments protect us from deception?

2. Think of the teachers, preachers, and voices you listen to most. What fruit have you seen in their doctrine, character, and followers?

3. Use the questions under "Testing the message of love" to examine a message about love that you have heard recently. What did you find?

4. Read Revelation 2:1–5. Are you more at risk of love without discernment, or discernment without love?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Speaking the Truth in Love

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

{Leviticus 19:17–18}

When Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest, He gave two answers. The first came from Deuteronomy 6:5: love the LORD your God with all your heart. The second came from Leviticus 19:18: *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* {Matthew 22:37–39}.

Most of us know that second commandment by heart. But how many of us have ever read the verse right before it?

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him" {Leviticus 19:17}.

The most famous command about loving our neighbor comes immediately after a command to rebuke our neighbor. They are in the same breath. In God's mind, they belong together.

This one passage turns our modern idea of love upside down. We think that to love someone means never to correct them. God says that refusing to correct someone can actually be a form of hatred.

Hate in the heart

Look carefully at the order in Leviticus 19:17. First: *"You shall not hate your brother in your heart."* Then: *"You shall surely rebuke your neighbor."*

Why would God put those two things together? Because when someone wrongs us, or when we see them doing wrong, we have two choices. We can go to them and speak honestly. Or we can stay silent and let resentment grow in our hearts. We smile on the outside while something bitter takes root on the inside. We talk about them to others instead of talking to them.

God says that silence is not love. It is the soil in which hatred grows.

The Hebrew phrase translated "surely rebuke" repeats the same verb twice, *hokhe'ach tokhi'ach*. That is a way of adding emphasis in Hebrew. It means "you must definitely rebuke," "do not fail to rebuke." And the verb itself, *yakhach*, means to reason with, to set right, to correct, to show someone where they have gone wrong.

And then God says something that should make every one of us think: *"…and not bear sin because of him."* If I see my brother sinning and I say nothing, I share in some of the guilt. My silence makes me part of the problem.

The watchman

God made the same point very strongly to the prophet Ezekiel:

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me: When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand" {Ezekiel 3:17–18}.

A watchman stood on the city wall and watched for danger. If he saw an enemy army approaching and blew the trumpet, he had done his job, whether the people listened or not. But if he saw the danger and kept quiet because he didn't want to upset anyone, the blood of the city was on his hands.

Ezekiel's role as a prophet was unique, and we should be careful about applying every detail to ourselves. But the principle is clear throughout Scripture: those who know the truth have a responsibility to warn. Love blows the trumpet.

Imagine walking past a house and seeing smoke pouring out of an upstairs window. You know a family lives there. Would you keep walking because you didn't want to intrude? Would you say to yourself, "Who am I to judge whether their house is on fire?" Of course not. You would

bang on the door. You would shout. You might even break a window. And no one would call that unloving. They would call you a hero.

Why do we understand that so easily when it comes to fire, and so poorly when it comes to sin?

Speaking the truth in love

Paul gives us one of the most balanced phrases in the whole Bible in Ephesians 4:15: *"but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ."*

The Greek phrase is interesting. Paul uses a single verb, *alētheuō*, which comes from the word for truth. A very literal translation would be "truthing in love." It means speaking the truth, but it also means living the truth, holding to the truth, being people of the truth.

And Paul says we are to do this *in love*. Not truth without love. Not love without truth. Both together.

Truth without love is brutal. It may be accurate, but it wounds without healing. It is the person who quotes the right verse in the wrong spirit, who seems to enjoy pointing out others' sin.

Love without truth is useless. It may feel kind, but it leaves people in danger. It is the person who would rather be liked than be honest.

Jesus was *"full of grace and truth"* {John 1:14}. Not half and half. Full of both. That is the goal for every one of us.

And look at the result Paul expects: that we will *"grow up in all things into Him."* Speaking the truth in love is how the body of Christ matures. A church where no one ever speaks the truth to anyone else will stay spiritually immature forever.

Restoring gently

Paul gave very practical instructions for how to approach a brother or sister caught in sin:

"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" {Galatians 6:1–2}.

Every phrase in those verses is worth slowing down for.

"You who are spiritual." This is not a job for everyone in every situation. It is for those who are walking in the Spirit, who have dealt with their own planks, and whose lives give them credibility.

"Restore." The Greek word is *katartizō*. It was used for mending fishing nets {Matthew 4:21} and, in medical writing of that era, for setting broken bones. The goal of correction is not to punish, embarrass, or win an argument. It is to mend what is torn and set what is broken, so that the person can be whole again.

"In a spirit of gentleness." Setting a broken bone requires firmness, but also great care. You don't do it carelessly. Gentleness is not weakness. It is strength under control.

“Considering yourself lest you also be tempted.” Before you go, look in the mirror. Remember that you are capable of the same sin. Pride is the great danger for anyone who corrects someone else.

“Bear one another’s burdens.” Correction is not a drive-by. It is a commitment to walk alongside someone and help carry their load.

Jesus’ pattern for correction

Jesus gave His disciples a clear process for dealing with sin between believers:

“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church” {Matthew 18:15–17}.

Notice how Jesus starts: privately. *“Between you and him alone.”* Not on social media. Not in the prayer chain. Not over coffee with your friends. Go to the person directly.

And notice the goal: *“If he hears you, you have gained your brother.”* The point is to win the person back, not to win the argument.

It is also striking that this passage comes right after Jesus’ parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to look for the one lost sheep {Matthew 18:12–14}. And it comes right before Peter asks how many times he should forgive, and Jesus says seventy times seven {Matthew

18:21–22}. Correction sits right in the middle of searching love and endless forgiveness. That tells us something about the spirit in which it should be done.

With gentleness, and with hope

Paul told Timothy how a servant of the Lord should deal with people who are in error:

"And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will" {2 Timothy 2:24–26}.

Not quarrelsome. Gentle. Patient. Humble. And still correcting. Paul doesn't say that gentleness means staying quiet. He says that correction must be done gently.

And look at how Paul sees the person in error. He doesn't see an enemy to defeat. He sees a captive to be rescued, someone caught in "the snare of the devil." And he recognizes that in the end, it is God who grants repentance. Our job is to speak the truth faithfully and gently. The results belong to God.

When the truth makes you an enemy

We need to be honest: speaking the truth in love will not always be received with gratitude. Paul asked the Galatians a painful question: *"Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?"* {Galatians 4:16}.

Sometimes it will cost you. People may pull away. They may call you judgmental, unloving, or self-righteous. That can hurt deeply, especially when it comes from people you love.

But remember, they said worse things about Jesus. And remember what we learned in Proverbs: *"Faithful are the wounds of a friend"* {Proverbs 27:6}. If you have examined your own heart, spoken with gentleness and humility, and used God's Word rather than your own opinion, then you have done what love requires. You can leave the rest with God.

And when someone does receive it, the reward is great. *"Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins"* {James 5:19–20}.

Save a soul from death. That is what is at stake.

Receiving correction ourselves

We can't talk about giving correction without talking about receiving it. In fact, this may be the real test of whether we understand love. It's easy to believe in correction when we're the ones giving it.

David prayed, *"Let the righteous strike me; it shall be a kindness. And let him rebuke me; it shall be as excellent oil on my head; let my head not refuse it"* {Psalm 141:5}.

That is a beautiful prayer. David didn't just tolerate correction. He asked for it, and he called it a kindness.

The writer of Hebrews tells us to *"exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin"* {Hebrews 3:13}. Sin deceives. It hardens. And one of God's main tools for protecting us from its deceitfulness is the honest word of a brother or sister who loves us.

Do you have people in your life who are allowed to tell you the truth? If not, ask God for them. And when they speak, don't reach for "Judge not." Reach for Psalm 141:5.

A few practical guidelines

Let me close this chapter with some simple guidelines drawn from everything we've seen.

1. **Pray first.** Ask God to search your own heart and to prepare theirs.
2. **Remove your plank.** Deal honestly with your own sin before addressing someone else's {Matthew 7:5}.
3. **Check your motive.** Are you going to restore, or to win? To help, or to vent?
4. **Get the facts.** Don't act on rumor or appearance {Proverbs 18:13; John 7:24}.
5. **Use God's Word, not your preferences.** Make sure the issue is something Scripture actually addresses.
6. **Go privately.** Start one-on-one {Matthew 18:15}.
7. **Be gentle.** Speak as someone who knows they need grace too {Galatians 6:1}.

8. **Season your words.** *"Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt"* {Colossians 4:6}.

9. **Aim for restoration.** The goal is to gain your brother, not to lose him.

10. **Leave the results to God.** You are responsible to speak faithfully. He is the One who grants repentance {2 Timothy 2:25}.

And one more, which may be the most important of all: be the kind of person who receives correction gladly. Nothing will give your words more credibility than a life that is open to correction itself.

Examine Yourself

1. Read Leviticus 19:17–18 again. Is there someone toward whom you have been carrying silent resentment instead of speaking honestly?

2. When it comes to speaking the truth in love, do you tend to lean toward truth without love, or love without truth?

3. Is there someone the Lord may be asking you to go to, gently and privately, to help restore? What would the first step be?

4. Who in your life is allowed to tell you the truth? How do you usually respond when they do?

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Peace, Peace,” When There Is No Peace

“For they have healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ when there is no peace.”

{Jeremiah 6:14}

In the last chapter, we looked at *how* to speak the truth in love. In this chapter, I want to talk about *why it matters so much*. Because there are two ways we can fail the people we love, and both of them are common in the church today.

The first is to **affirm** them in their sin: to tell them it’s fine, to cheer them on, even to celebrate it. The second is to **stay silent**: to see them heading toward destruction and say nothing, because speaking up would be uncomfortable or costly.

One of these feels loving. The other feels safe. But the Bible treats both as serious failures of love. And when eternity is at stake, they are not small failures.

The prophets who said “Peace”

In the days of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the nation of Judah was in deep trouble. The people had turned to idols, the poor were being oppressed, and God’s judgment was coming. God sent His prophets to warn them.

But there were other prophets too. They were popular, well-paid, and very encouraging. And their message was always the same: *Everything is fine. God loves you. Nothing bad is going to happen.*

God’s verdict on them was devastating: *“For they have healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ when there is no peace”* {Jeremiah 6:14}.

Imagine a doctor who finds a deadly infection in a patient. Instead of treating it, he puts a small bandage on the surface, smiles, and sends the patient home. The patient feels relieved. The doctor feels kind. And the infection keeps spreading. That is what it means to heal a wound “slightly.”

Ezekiel used another picture. He said the false prophets were like men who whitewashed a crumbling wall: *“Because, indeed, because they have seduced My people, saying, ‘Peace!’ when there is no peace—and one builds a wall, and they plaster it with untempered mortar”* {Ezekiel 13:10}. The wall looked fine on the outside. But when the storm came, it collapsed, and it fell on the people inside.

And then God said something that should make every one of us tremble:

“Because with lies you have made the heart of the righteous sad, whom I have not made sad; and you have

strengthened the hands of the wicked, so that he does not turn from his wicked way to save his life" {Ezekiel 13:22}.

Read that slowly. The false prophets didn't just fail to help. Their encouragement actively *strengthened the hands of the wicked*. Their affirmation kept people from turning back. Their kind words cost people their lives.

That is the danger of affirming sin. It doesn't just leave people where they are. It strengthens them in the very thing that is destroying them.

Approving what God condemns

Paul ends the first chapter of Romans with a long, sobering list of sins. It includes sexual sin, but also envy, deceit, gossip, pride, boasting, disobedience to parents, and being unloving and unmerciful {Romans 1:24–31}. And then he says this:

"Who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them" {Romans 1:32}.

Notice how Paul ends the list. It's one thing to do these things. But Paul names something that goes even further: *approving* of those who practice them. Giving them applause. Cheering them on.

Why would that be so serious? Because the person who sins may be caught in weakness. But the person who approves of sin is making a deliberate statement about right and wrong. They are standing beside the sin and saying, "This is good." It is the very thing Isaiah warned about:

"Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil" {Isaiah 5:20}.

We live in a culture that has turned approval into the highest form of love. If you love someone, you must celebrate whatever they choose. Every decision must be applauded. Every lifestyle must be affirmed. And anyone who doesn't clap along is called hateful.

But love that applauds a person on their way to destruction is not love. It is flattery. And Proverbs has a sharp word for it: *"A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet"* {Proverbs 29:5}. Flattery isn't harmless. It is a trap.

When the church celebrates

The danger isn't only out in the world. It can happen in the church too.

In Corinth, a man in the church was living in open sexual sin with his father's wife. And Paul was not only grieved by the man's sin. He was shocked by the church's reaction: *"And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned"* {1 Corinthians 5:2}.

The church was *proud*. Perhaps they thought they were being open-minded, or gracious, or free. Perhaps they thought their tolerance proved how much they understood grace. But Paul said they should have been mourning. And he warned them: *"Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"* {1 Corinthians 5:6}.

Sin that is celebrated doesn't stay small. It spreads. What one generation tolerates, the next generation celebrates, and the generation after that requires everyone else to celebrate too.

Paul's instruction to the Ephesians is clear: *"And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them"* {Ephesians 5:11}.

Loving people without applauding sin

Now let me be very careful here, because it's easy to hear all of this and decide that the answer is to keep away from sinners. That is not the answer, and it is not what Jesus did.

Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. The religious leaders complained about it: *"This Man receives sinners and eats with them"* {Luke 15:2}. And Jesus answered with three stories about lost things: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son {Luke 15:3–32}. He was with sinners because He had come to find them.

But notice: Jesus never celebrated their sin. He sat at Zacchaeus' table, and Zacchaeus repented {Luke 19:1–10}. He spoke with the woman at the well, and He gently but directly named her sin {John 4:16–18}. Being *with* people is not the same as *applauding* what they do. Jesus was a friend of sinners {Matthew 11:19}, but He was never a friend of sin.

So the question isn't whether we will love, welcome, and spend time with people whose lives don't line up with God's Word. Of course we will. Every one of us was once that person. The question is whether our words and actions tell them the truth or tell them a lie.

Sincere believers will sometimes come to different conclusions about specific situations: which invitations to accept, which events to attend, how to show love to a family member without giving the impression of approval. Those decisions need prayer, wisdom, and a clear conscience {Romans 14:5}. But the principle is not in question. We can love people deeply. We can serve them, eat with them, and be there for them. But we must never call evil good.

The danger of silence

The second way we fail people is quieter, and that makes it more common. It is simply saying nothing.

We see a friend drifting from God and we change the subject. We watch a family member make choices that will wreck their life and we stay quiet to keep the peace. We hear a brother or sister call sin "no big deal" and we nod along. We tell ourselves we're being respectful, or that it isn't our place, or that we don't want to be judgmental.

But the Bible doesn't treat silence as neutral.

"Deliver those who are drawn toward death, and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, 'Surely we did not know this,' does not He who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does He not know it? And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?" {Proverbs 24:11–12}.

Notice the excuse God anticipates: *"Surely we did not know this."* That is the excuse of the silent. *I didn't realize it was that serious. I didn't think it was my business.* And God says, "I weigh the heart. I know whether you knew."

We have already seen God's words to Ezekiel about the watchman whose silence made him responsible for the blood of the people {Ezekiel 3:18}. That principle didn't disappear in the New Testament. Paul told the Ephesian elders, *"Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God"* {Acts 20:26–27}. Paul could say his hands were clean because he had not kept silent.

A father who stayed quiet

One of the saddest stories in the Old Testament is about a good man who failed in exactly this way.

Eli was the high priest of Israel. He was the one who raised the young prophet Samuel. But his own sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were wicked. They served as priests, but they stole from the offerings and committed sexual sin at the very door of the tabernacle {1 Samuel 2:12–17, 22}.

Eli knew about it. He even spoke to them once, mildly {1 Samuel 2:23–25}. But he never acted. He never removed them from the priesthood. And God sent a message to Eli that is hard to read: *"Why do you… honor your sons more than Me?"* {1 Samuel 2:29}.

And later, God told Samuel why judgment was coming on Eli's house: *"because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them"* {1 Samuel 3:13}.

Eli didn't commit his sons' sins. But his silence and his weak response were counted against him. He loved his sons, but he loved his comfort and his relationship with

them more than he loved God's truth, and in the end, it cost them their lives.

It is possible to honor the people we love more than we honor God. And one of the clearest signs is when we will not say what God has said, because we are afraid of what it will cost us with them.

Why we stay silent

If we're honest, most of our silence doesn't come from love. It comes from fear.

"The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe" {Proverbs 29:25}.

We're afraid of being rejected. Afraid of being called judgmental. Afraid of losing a friendship, of tension at family gatherings, of being unfollowed or uninvited. Those fears are real, and I don't want to pretend they're not.

But John tells us something sobering about some of the leaders in Jesus' day: *"Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God"* {John 12:42–43}.

They believed. But they stayed quiet, because they loved the approval of people more than the approval of God.

Paul faced the same choice and settled it: *"For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ"* {Galatians 1:10}.

Counting the cost

I want to be honest with you. Speaking the truth in love may cost you a friendship. It may cost you something with your family. It may cost you a seat at a table you enjoyed.

It cost John the Baptist his life. He told King Herod, *"It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife"* {Mark 6:18}, and he lost his head for it.

It cost Jesus followers. After one hard teaching, *"many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more"* {John 6:66}. Jesus didn't run after them and soften His words. He turned to the twelve and asked, *"Do you also want to go away?"* {John 6:67}.

It cost Paul friends. Near the end of his life, he wrote, *"At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me"* {2 Timothy 4:16}.

Jesus told us plainly that following Him would sometimes divide even families {Matthew 10:34–37}. So we shouldn't be surprised when the truth costs us something.

But here is what we must weigh against that cost.

What is really at stake

You may lose a friend by sharing the truth in love. But you may also save a soul from hell.

We don't like to talk about hell. But Jesus did, more than anyone else in the Bible. *"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is*

able to destroy both soul and body in hell" {Matthew 10:28}.

If hell is real, and Jesus said it is, then silence is not a small thing. If I truly believe that someone I love is on a road that leads to eternal separation from God, then the most unloving thing I could possibly do is say nothing to protect my own comfort.

Jesus told a story about a rich man who died and found himself in torment {Luke 16:19–31}. And one of the most heartbreaking details in that story is what the rich man asked for. He didn't ask for relief for himself. He asked for someone to go and warn his five brothers, *"lest they also come to this place of torment"* {Luke 16:28}.

Even in torment, the rich man understood what so many of us forget: a warning is an act of love.

And remember the promise James gives: *"Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins"* {James 5:20}.

Jude puts it even more urgently:

"And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but ***others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire****, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh"* {Jude 22–23}.

The word translated "pulling" is *harpazō*. It means to snatch, to seize, to grab hold of something quickly and with force. It is the same word Paul uses for believers being *"caught up"* to meet the Lord in the air {1 Thessalonians 4:17}. It is not a gentle suggestion. It is the action of

someone who sees a person standing in a fire and reaches in to grab them before it is too late.

Notice, too, that Jude says to do it *with fear*. That is a holy fear, a sober awareness of how real the danger is, and a humble awareness that we are not above falling into the same fire ourselves. We don't reach in with a sense of superiority. We reach in trembling, because we know what is at stake, and because we remember that we were once pulled out of that same fire. God described one of His servants as *"a brand plucked from the fire"* {Zechariah 3:2}. Every believer is.

Nobody stands at the edge of a burning house and politely asks whether the person inside would like to discuss their options. Love moves. Love reaches in. Love would rather be singed than watch someone burn.

When you put a friendship on one side of the scale and a soul on the other, the scale is not close.

The friend who thanks you later

Here is something else to remember. Losing a friend for a season is not always losing them forever.

"He who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than he who flatters with the tongue" {Proverbs 28:23}.

Notice the word *afterward*. In the moment, flattery wins. People like the one who tells them what they want to hear. But afterward, sometimes years afterward, the one who told the truth is the one they remember with gratitude.

Many believers can point to a person who loved them enough to say something hard. A grandmother who wouldn't stop praying and wouldn't stop saying, "This isn't who God made you to be." A friend who sat them down and said, "I love you too much to watch this." At the time, it may have made them angry. Now, they thank God for that person.

You may be that person for someone. You may not see the fruit right away. But God sees it, and His Word does not return void {Isaiah 55:11}.

Speaking up wisely

None of this means we should become people who comment on every sin we see, or who correct people we barely know, or who repeat the same rebuke every time we see someone. Everything we said in the last chapter still applies: remove your own plank, pray first, go privately, use God's Word, be gentle, and aim for restoration.

Here are a few more things to keep in mind:

- **Look for the open door.** Pray for an opportunity, and when God gives you one, take it. Often it comes when the person brings up the subject themselves.
- **Ask questions.** "How do you think God sees this?" "What does His Word say about it?" Questions often open hearts that statements close.
- **Say it clearly, then keep loving.** Once you have spoken the truth plainly and kindly, you don't need to repeat it at every meeting. Keep praying, keep showing up, and keep the door open.

- **Don’t treat them as an enemy.** Paul wrote that even when someone refuses correction, *“do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother”* {2 Thessalonians 3:15}.
- **Leave the results to God.** You are responsible for being faithful. You are not responsible for the other person’s choice.

Not “Peace, peace”

The false prophets of Jeremiah’s day were loved. They were invited to every gathering. They never lost a friend. And they sent a nation into ruin with their kind words.

Jeremiah was mocked, beaten, imprisoned, and thrown into a muddy cistern {Jeremiah 20:2; 37:15; 38:6}. He lost almost every friend he had. And he was the one who was telling the truth.

Which would you rather be?

The love of God doesn’t say “Peace, peace” when there is no peace. It says, “There is a real danger, and there is a real Savior. Turn back, and live.” *“For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord GOD. “Therefore turn and live!”* {Ezekiel 18:32}.

That is what God says to the world. And He has given us the privilege of saying it with Him.

Examine Yourself

1. Have you ever affirmed or celebrated something in someone's life that you knew God's Word calls sin? Why did you do it?

2. Is there someone in your life right now who is drifting toward destruction, and you have stayed silent? What has kept you quiet?

3. Read 1 Samuel 2:22–25 and 3:13. In what ways might you be honoring someone you love more than you honor God?

4. Proverbs 24:11 tells us to "deliver those who are drawn toward death." Ask God this week for an open door to speak the truth in love to one person, and for the courage to walk through it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Itching Ears

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”

{2 Timothy 4:3–4}

It is late on a Saturday night, and a pastor is sitting alone in his study.

On the desk in front of him is the sermon he has been working on all week. The text is hard. It is one of those passages that names sin plainly and calls for repentance. He has prayed over it. He knows the Lord laid it on his heart.

But next to the sermon is another stack of papers: the attendance report, the giving report, and a note from a staff member mentioning that a few of the church’s most generous families have been “feeling a little uncomfortable” with some of the recent messages. Three families left last month. The building payment is due. The church down the

road, the one with the coffee bar and the light show and the messages about living your best life, is growing fast.

He looks at the sermon. He looks at the reports. And slowly, almost without realizing it, he starts softening the edges. He cuts the paragraph about sexual sin. He changes "repent" to "consider." He replaces the warning with an encouraging story. By the time he turns off the lamp, the sermon is pleasant, inspiring, and safe.

Nobody will leave tomorrow. Nobody will be offended. And nobody will be changed.

That pastor is imaginary. But if you have been in church for any length of time, you know he isn't far from the truth. And the Bible saw him coming.

"The time will come"

The apostle Paul was in a Roman prison, near the end of his life, when he wrote his final letter. It was addressed to Timothy, the young pastor he had trained like a son. And in the last chapter of the last letter he ever wrote, Paul gave Timothy a solemn charge:

"I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" {2 Timothy 4:1–2}.

Notice the words Paul chose. *Convince. Rebuke. Exhort.* Two of those three are corrective. Paul did not tell Timothy to keep everyone comfortable. He told him to preach the

Word, whether it was welcome or not (“in season and out of season”), and to do it with patience and careful teaching.

And then Paul explained why it was so urgent:

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” {2 Timothy 4:3–4}.

The phrase “itching ears” translates a Greek word, *knēthō*, that means to itch or to tickle. Paul is describing people who want their ears scratched. They don’t come to hear what God has said. They come to hear what feels good.

And look at what they do: *“they will heap up for themselves teachers.”* They go shopping. If one teacher says something uncomfortable, they find another one who won’t. They collect voices that agree with *“their own desires.”*

Here is the sobering part. Where there is demand, there will always be supply. When enough people want their ears tickled, there will always be teachers willing to tickle them.

“Speak to us smooth things”

This isn’t a new problem. Seven hundred years before Paul, God spoke through Isaiah about a people who had made the very same request:

“That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children who will not hear the law of the LORD; who say to the seers, ‘Do not see,’ and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us

right things; speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us'" {Isaiah 30:9–11}.

Read that slowly. The people were actually telling their prophets what to preach. *Don't tell us what is right. Tell us smooth things. Get the Holy One of Israel out of our sight.* They didn't want God removed from their religion. They just wanted His holiness removed from their sermons.

Jeremiah saw the same thing in his day, and he wrote one of the most heartbreaking verses in the Old Testament:

"The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; ***and My people love to have it so.*** *But what will you do in the end?"* {Jeremiah 5:30–31}.

My people love to have it so. The false prophets weren't forcing their message on unwilling listeners. The people loved it. The pulpit and the pews had made an agreement: you tell us what we want to hear, and we will keep coming.

The prophet Micah put it with biting sarcasm: *"If a man should walk in a false spirit and speak a lie, saying, 'I will prophesy to you of wine and drink,' even he would be the prattler of this people"* {Micah 2:11}. In other words: preach about parties and prosperity, and the crowds will love you.

"I feared the people"

The Bible gives us several portraits of leaders who gave in to the crowd. They are worth studying, because the pressure they felt is the same pressure many leaders feel today.

Aaron was left in charge while Moses was on the mountain with God. The people grew impatient and demanded, *"Come, make us gods that shall go before us"* {Exodus 32:1}. And Aaron gave them exactly what they asked for: a golden calf. When Moses came down and confronted him, Aaron's excuse was revealing: *"You know the people, that they are set on evil"* {Exodus 32:22}. In other words, *They wanted it. What was I supposed to do?*

King Saul was commanded by God to completely destroy the Amalekites. Instead, he kept the best of the livestock. When the prophet Samuel confronted him, Saul finally admitted the real reason: *"I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, **because I feared the people and obeyed their voice**"* {1 Samuel 15:24}.

That sentence could be written over many pulpits today. *I feared the people and obeyed their voice.*

And then there is **Pontius Pilate**. He knew Jesus was innocent. He said so more than once {Luke 23:4, 14, 22}. But the crowd was shouting, and Mark tells us exactly what drove his decision: *"So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified"* {Mark 15:15}.

Wanting to gratify the crowd. That is the temptation in its simplest form. And the cost of giving in to it is always higher than it looks.

The Shepherd who let the crowd walk away

Now look at Jesus, because He faced the same temptation and chose the opposite path.

In John 6, Jesus fed five thousand men with five loaves and two fish {John 6:10}. It was one of the biggest crowds of His ministry. The next day, the crowd came looking for Him again. By any modern measure, His ministry was exploding.

And then Jesus taught them something hard. He told them that He was the bread of life, and that unless they ate His flesh and drank His blood, they had no life in them {John 6:53}. He was calling them to a total dependence on Him that went far beyond free lunches.

The response was immediate. *"This is a hard saying; who can understand it?"* {John 6:60}. And then: *"From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more"* {John 6:66}.

In a single chapter, Jesus went from five thousand to a handful. If He had been measuring success by attendance, John 6 would have been His worst day.

Did He call them back and soften the message? Did He say, "Let Me explain that in a way that's a little more comfortable"? No. He turned to the twelve and asked, *"Do you also want to go away?"* {John 6:67}.

And Peter gave the answer that every true disciple eventually gives: *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life"* {John 6:68}.

Jesus was willing to lose the crowd to keep the truth. And the ones who stayed were the ones who turned the world upside down.

What Jesus said to the churches

If we want to know what Jesus thinks of a church that tolerates sin to keep the peace, we don't have to guess. In Revelation 2 and 3, He wrote letters to seven churches. And several of them were rebuked specifically for what they tolerated.

To the church in Pergamos, He said, *"But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam"* {Revelation 2:14}.

To the church in Thyatira, a church He praised for its love, service, faith, and patience, He said, *"Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because* ***you allow*** *that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality"* {Revelation 2:19–20}.

Notice: Thyatira was a loving, serving, growing church. And Jesus still had something against it, because it *allowed* false teaching and sin to go unchallenged.

And to the church in Sardis, He said something that should make every church leader stop: *"I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead"* {Revelation 3:1}.

Sardis had a reputation. People talked about it. It looked alive. It probably had good attendance and an impressive

calendar. But Jesus looked past the reputation and saw a corpse.

The question Jesus asks of a church is never "How many?" It is "How faithful?"

Faithful, not famous

The Bible measures success very differently than we do.

When Gideon prepared to fight the Midianites, he had thirty-two thousand men. God said, *"The people who are with you are too many"* {Judges 7:2}. By the time God was finished, Gideon had three hundred {Judges 7:7}. God wanted it to be unmistakably clear that the victory was His, not the result of a big crowd.

Noah preached righteousness for years {2 Peter 2:5}, and when the flood came, eight people were in the ark {1 Peter 3:20}. By attendance standards, his ministry was a disaster. By God's standard, he was faithful.

Paul put it simply: *"Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful"* {1 Corinthians 4:2}. Not successful. Not popular. Not growing. Faithful.

This doesn't mean that a growing church is a bad church, or that a small church is automatically faithful. God often grows churches that preach the truth. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached a message that told the crowd plainly that they had crucified their Messiah and needed to repent, and three thousand people were saved {Acts 2:36–41}. The truth, preached in the power of the Spirit, draws people to God.

But numbers can never be the measure. And when a church begins to decide what to preach based on what will keep the numbers up, it has already begun to drift.

Methods may change; the message may not

Now, let's be fair. There is nothing wrong with wanting people to come to church. There is nothing wrong with good music, warm greetings, clear communication, or even a coffee bar. Paul said, *"I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some"* {1 Corinthians 9:22}. He adapted his approach to reach different people.

But Paul adapted his *methods*. He never adapted his *message*. The same man who became all things to all men also wrote, *"For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God"* {2 Corinthians 2:17}, and *"We have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God"* {2 Corinthians 4:2}.

The word "peddling" describes a dishonest merchant who waters down his wine to make more money. Paul refused to water down the Word to make it sell.

He told the Thessalonians the same thing: *"We speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness—God is witness"* {1 Thessalonians 2:4–5}.

That is the line. Make the doors as welcoming as you can. But never make the message smaller than God made it.

Shepherds who feed themselves

Why does this matter so much? Because people are at stake.

God spoke a fierce word through Ezekiel to the leaders of His people:

"Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?... The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost" {Ezekiel 34:2–4}.

A shepherd who protects his own position, his own salary, or his own reputation by keeping the sheep comfortable is feeding himself, not the flock. And the sheep pay the price. The weak stay weak. The sick stay sick. The lost stay lost.

That is why Scripture holds leaders to such a high standard. *"My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment"* {James 3:1}. Those who lead God's people *"watch out for your souls, as those who must give account"* {Hebrews 13:17}.

Every pastor will one day give an account to the Chief Shepherd. Not for how many people he gathered, but for whether he fed them the truth.

A word to pastors and leaders

If you are a pastor or a leader, I want to speak to you directly, and gently.

The pressure is real. Many pastors know what it feels like to look out at empty seats, or to watch a family they love walk out the door after a hard message. The bills are real, and the comparisons are constant.

But hear what God said to a young, frightened Jeremiah: *"Do not be afraid of their faces, for I am with you to deliver you"* {Jeremiah 1:8}.

And hear the promise Peter gave to faithful shepherds: *"Shepherd the flock of God which is among you… not for dishonest gain but eagerly… and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away"* {1 Peter 5:2–4}.

The applause of the crowd fades by Monday. The crown the Chief Shepherd gives never fades.

You don't have to be harsh. Everything we have learned in this book about speaking the truth in love still applies. Be gentle. Be patient. Be humble. Weep over the flock. But don't be silent, and don't be smooth. Preach the Word.

A word to the rest of us

It would be easy to read this chapter and blame the pulpit. But remember Isaiah 30. It was the *people* who said, "Speak to us smooth things." And remember Jeremiah 5: *"My people love to have it so."*

Pulpits are shaped by pews. If we reward pastors who flatter us and punish pastors who correct us, we will eventually get the preaching we have paid for.

So here is what we can do:

- **Don’t heap up teachers.** When a message convicts you, don’t go looking for a different voice that will tell you what you want to hear.
- **Thank your pastor for hard truths.** Most pastors hear plenty of complaints. Very few hear, “Thank you for preaching that. I needed it.”
- **Stay when it hurts.** Unless a church has truly abandoned the truth, don’t leave just because a message stepped on your toes. Let the Word do its work.
- **Pray for your leaders.** Ask God to give them courage, wisdom, and a love for the flock that is stronger than their fear of losing it.
- **Make their work a joy.** Hebrews 13:17 says to let them lead *“with joy and not with grief.”* A teachable congregation is one of the greatest gifts a pastor can receive.

“But what will you do in the end?”

Let’s go back to that pastor in his study one more time. Imagine that, instead of softening the sermon, he gets down on his knees. He tells the Lord he is afraid. He asks for courage. And the next morning, he stands up and preaches the passage just as God gave it, with tears in his eyes and love in his voice.

Maybe a family leaves. Maybe the offering is smaller that week.

But maybe, somewhere in the back row, a man who has been living a double life for years hears the truth for the first time in a long time. Maybe a young woman who was about to make a choice that would wreck her life decides not to. Maybe a lukewarm church begins, slowly, to wake up.

Jeremiah's question still hangs in the air for every church and every pastor: *"But what will you do in the end?"* {Jeremiah 5:31}.

In the end, the crowd will not stand beside us before the judgment seat of Christ. The giving report will not. The attendance numbers will not. Only one question will matter: *Were you faithful to what I said?*

A church that is afraid to lose its audience may keep the audience and lose its Lord. But a church that is willing to lose its audience for the sake of the truth will never lose Him.

Examine Yourself

1. Have you ever left a church, or wanted to, because a message made you uncomfortable? Looking back, was the problem the message or your heart?

2. Read Isaiah 30:9–11 and Jeremiah 5:30–31. In what ways do congregations today ask their leaders to "speak smooth things"?

3. Saul said, "I feared the people and obeyed their voice." Where in your own life, at work, at home, or in ministry, has fear of people shaped what you say?

4. This week, write a note of encouragement to your pastor or a leader who has told you the truth, even when it was hard to hear, and commit to praying for them regularly.

Part Four: Walking It Out

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Battle for Your Mind

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

{Ephesians 6:10–12}

Many of us learned about the armor of God in Sunday school. We colored pictures of a Roman soldier with a helmet, a shield, and a sword. We made cardboard breastplates. It was a sweet lesson, and the pictures stuck.

But somewhere along the way, many of us began to treat Ephesians 6 as a nice metaphor, a pleasant way of describing the Christian life. Something to put on a poster.

Paul didn't write it that way. He wrote it from prison, as *"an ambassador in chains"* {Ephesians 6:20}, very likely within sight of real Roman soldiers. He wasn't decorating his letter. He was warning the church that they were in a

war. A real one. With a real enemy. And the casualties are eternal.

A real war

Look at the words Paul uses. *"The wiles of the devil."* The Greek word for "wiles" is *methodeia*, from which we get our word "method." It means schemes, strategies, carefully planned tactics. The devil is not random. He has methods.

"We do not wrestle." The word for "wrestle" is *palē*. It describes hand-to-hand combat, close and personal, the kind of struggle where you can feel your opponent's breath. This is not a distant war we read about in the news. It is close.

And look at who we are fighting: *"principalities… powers… the rulers of the darkness of this age… spiritual hosts of wickedness."* Paul is telling us that behind the visible struggles of life, there is an invisible battle being waged by real spiritual beings who are organized, determined, and opposed to God.

Peter said the same thing: *"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour"* {1 Peter 5:8}.

We live in a culture that laughs at the idea of a devil. And that may be one of his greatest victories. A soldier who doesn't believe there is a war will never put on his armor.

Where the battle is fought

So where is this war being fought? Paul tells us in his second letter to the Corinthians:

"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, ***bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ****"* {2 Corinthians 10:3–5}.

Look at the targets in that passage: *strongholds*, *arguments*, *every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God*, *every thought*. The battlefield is the mind.

The enemy's main attack is not on your circumstances. It is on your thinking. If he can shape what you believe, he doesn't need to do much else. Your choices will follow your thoughts. *"For as he thinks in his heart, so is he"* {Proverbs 23:7}.

A "stronghold" is a fortress, a place that has been fortified and walled up. Spiritual strongholds are patterns of thinking that have been built up over time, often over years, and that stand against what God has said. *God could never forgive me. I'll never change. This is just how I am. God didn't really mean that. A loving God would never ask that of me.* Those thoughts become walls, and behind them, sin feels safe.

That is why Paul says, *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"* {Romans 12:2}. Transformation begins in the mind.

“Has God indeed said?”

If you want to understand the enemy’s strategy, go back to the very first time he spoke in the Bible. We looked at this briefly in Chapter 4, but I want to look at it again from a different angle, because the method he used in the garden is the same method he uses today.

The serpent’s first words to Eve were a question: *“Has God indeed said…?”* {Genesis 3:1}.

He didn’t start by denying God. He started by raising a doubt. *Did God really say that? Are you sure that’s what He meant?*

Then he moved to an outright contradiction: *“You will not surely die”* {Genesis 3:4}. God said one thing. The serpent said the opposite.

And finally, he attacked God’s character: *“For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God”* {Genesis 3:5}. In other words, *God is holding out on you. He doesn’t really have your best interest at heart.*

Doubt God’s Word. Deny God’s Word. Distrust God’s heart. That is the enemy’s method, and it has not changed since the garden.

He even tried it on Jesus. In the wilderness, he said, *“If You are the Son of God…”* {Matthew 4:3}, trying to plant a doubt about what the Father had just declared at Jesus’ baptism: *“This is My beloved Son”* {Matthew 3:17}. And when that didn’t work, he quoted Scripture, twisting Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus to presume on God {Matthew 4:6}. Satan

knows the Bible. He just uses it to lead people away from God instead of toward Him.

Jesus called him *"a liar and the father of it"* {John 8:44}. Lies are his native language.

Why the world is so loud

This is why our culture is so loud.

Have you noticed how much noise there is? Every screen, every song, every show, every feed is speaking. And so much of what it says opposes God's truth, mocks it, or twists it into something just slightly different. *Love is love. Follow your heart. Live your truth. Nobody can tell you what's right for you. God just wants you to be happy.*

That is not an accident. Paul calls Satan *"the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience"* {Ephesians 2:2}. John says, *"the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one"* {1 John 5:19}. And Paul says, *"the god of this age has blinded"* the minds of unbelievers, *"lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ… should shine on them"* {2 Corinthians 4:4}.

The noise of the world is the serpent's question on repeat, broadcast twenty-four hours a day: *Has God indeed said?*

And if we spend six hours a day listening to the world and six minutes a day listening to God, we shouldn't be surprised when the world's voice starts to sound like the truth.

What you think matters. It matters more than you know.

Three questions

So let me ask you three questions. They sound similar, but they are very different.

What do you know about God? This is information. You may know a great deal. You may know Bible stories, doctrines, and verses. That is good, and it matters. But knowledge alone does not save, and it does not protect. The devil knows more theology than any of us.

What do you believe about God? This is conviction. You may believe that He exists, that He is good, that Jesus died and rose again. That is good too. But James warns us, *"You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!"* {James 2:19}. It is possible to believe true things *about* God and still not trust Him.

Do you believe God? This is the question that matters most. Not "Do you believe *in* God?" but "Do you believe *God*?" When He says something, do you take Him at His word? When His Word says something different from what you feel, what you want, or what the culture says, whose voice wins?

Every spiritual battle eventually comes down to that last question.

Abraham believed God

The Bible gives us a man who answered that question well, and it holds him up as the father of everyone who has faith.

"And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith." {Genesis 15:6, NLT}.

The Hebrew word for "believed" comes from the root *aman*. It is the root of our word "amen." It means to be firm, to be certain, to lean your full weight on something. When Abraham believed God, he wasn't simply agreeing that God existed. He was resting his whole life on what God had said.

And notice what that looked like in practice. It looked like obedience.

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. ***And he went out, not knowing where he was going****"* {Hebrews 11:8}.

Abraham didn't have the big picture. He didn't have a map. He had a word from God, and that was enough.

Years later, God asked Abraham to do something that made no sense at all: to offer up Isaac, the very son through whom all the promises were supposed to come. Abraham didn't understand. But he obeyed, *"concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead"* {Hebrews 11:19}. He didn't know *how* God would keep His promise. He simply knew that God *would*.

Paul describes Abraham's faith this way: *"He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform"* {Romans 4:20–21}.

And James connects Abraham's belief directly to his obedience: *"And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' And he was called the friend of God"* {James 2:23}.

That is what believing God looks like. It means trusting Him and obeying Him, even when you don't understand the whole picture.

Agreeing with God

At its simplest, believing God means **agreeing with God**.

The prophet Amos asked, *"Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?"* {Amos 3:3}. We cannot walk with God while disagreeing with Him. We cannot say we love Him while arguing with His Word.

Agreeing with God means that when His Word calls something sin, I call it sin, even if the world calls it freedom. When His Word says He is good, I believe He is good, even when my circumstances are hard. When His Word says I can overcome, I believe I can overcome, even when I feel weak. When His Word tells me to do something, I do it, even if I don't see where it leads.

And here is something wonderful: **clarity comes after agreement, not before it.** Many people say, "When God explains Himself to me, then I'll obey." But Jesus said it works the other way around: *"If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God"* {John 7:17}. The willingness comes first. The understanding follows.

"In Your light we see light" {Psalm 36:9}. When we agree with God, we begin to see clearly. When we argue with Him, the fog only gets thicker.

The most dangerous place

There is a passage in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians that every believer should know. It describes the last days and the coming of *"the lawless one"*, the man of sin who will deceive the world. And it explains *why* so many will be deceived:

"The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, ***because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.*** *And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness"* {2 Thessalonians 2:9–12}.

Notice: these people were not deceived because the truth was hidden from them. They were deceived because they *did not receive the love of the truth*. The truth was available. They didn't want it. They preferred unrighteousness.

And then comes one of the most frightening sentences in the Bible: *"For this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie."* When a person persistently refuses to love the truth, God eventually gives them what they have chosen. He lets them believe the lie they wanted.

This is the most dangerous place a person can be. Not ignorant of the truth, but unwilling to love it.

And what is the truth? Jesus told us: *"Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth"* {John 17:17}. To refuse to love the Word of God, to treat it as optional, outdated, or negotiable, is to step out of the light and into a fog where any lie can look true.

It is not an accident that the title of this book, *Lawless Love*, and this passage share a word. The lawless one comes to people who would rather have a love without truth than the truth itself.

Putting on the armor

So how do we fight? Paul doesn't leave us defenseless. He tells us to put on *"the whole armor of God"* {Ephesians 6:11, 13}. Not some of it. All of it. Notice how much of it has to do with truth and with the mind.

"Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit" {Ephesians 6:14–18}.

The belt of truth. It comes first. A Roman soldier's belt held everything else in place. Without truth, nothing else holds together. This is why loving the truth matters so much.

The breastplate of righteousness. It guards the heart. A life of obedience protects us from the wounds that sin opens up.

The shoes of the gospel of peace. A soldier needs firm footing. The good news of what Jesus has done keeps us standing when the ground shakes.

The shield of faith. It quenches *"all the fiery darts of the wicked one."* What are those darts? Very often, they are thoughts: accusations, doubts, temptations, lies. *Has God indeed said?* Faith, believing God, is what puts them out.

The helmet of salvation. It protects the head, the mind. Knowing whose you are and what Christ has done for you guards your thinking against the enemy's attacks.

The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. This is the only offensive weapon in the list. The word Paul uses here is *rhēma*, often used for a spoken word. It is the Word of God spoken, applied, used in the moment of battle, exactly the way Jesus answered every temptation with *"It is written."*

Praying always. And the whole armor is worn in prayer, staying in constant communication with our Commander.

Guarding your thought life

Here are a few practical ways to fight the battle for your mind:

1. **Notice your thoughts.** Many of us have never stopped to ask where a thought came from. Start

paying attention to what you are thinking about God, about yourself, and about sin.

2. **Test every thought against the Word.** Does this thought agree with what God has said? If not, it is not the truth, no matter how true it feels.

3. **Take it captive.** Don't entertain a lie. Arrest it, name it, and replace it with what God says {2 Corinthians 10:5}.

4. **Guard what goes in.** *"I will set nothing wicked before my eyes"* {Psalm 101:3}. What you listen to and watch is shaping how you think.

5. **Fill your mind with what is true.** *"Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure… meditate on these things"* {Philippians 4:8}.

6. **Ask God to give you a love for the truth.** If you don't love His Word yet, tell Him honestly and ask Him to change your heart. That is a prayer He delights to answer.

The battle is real. But so is the victory. *"He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world"* {1 John 4:4}. The enemy has a strategy. But God has given us armor, a sword, and His own Spirit. We don't fight *for* victory. We fight *from* the victory Christ has already won.

Examine Yourself

1. Have you treated the armor of God as a real defense, or as a nice picture? What would change if you believed you were truly in a spiritual war?

2. Answer the three questions honestly: What do you know about God? What do you believe about God? Do you believe God?

3. Where has the enemy whispered “Has God indeed said?” into your own thinking? Which of God’s words have you begun to doubt or explain away?

4. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:9–12. Do you love the truth, or only tolerate it? Ask God to give you a deeper love for His Word.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Bad Company

“Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits.’ Awake to righteousness, and do not sin.”

{1 Corinthians 15:33–34}

In the last chapter, we saw that the battle for our lives is fought in our minds. That leads to a very practical question, and I want you to answer it honestly:

Who have you been listening to?

Not who you agree with on paper. Not who you would quote if someone asked. Who have you actually been *listening* to? Whose voice is in your ears in the car, on your phone before bed, in your feed when you wake up, around the table with your friends? What voices do you allow to shape the way you think and feel?

Because whoever you listen to most is discipling you. Every one of us is being formed by someone. The only question is by whom.

“Do not be deceived”

The Corinthian church had a problem. Some among them had begun to teach that there was no resurrection of the dead {1 Corinthians 15:12}. And Paul saw where that kind of thinking leads: *“If the dead do not rise, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’”* {1 Corinthians 15:32}. Bad doctrine was producing bad living.

So Paul warned them: *“Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’”* {1 Corinthians 15:33}.

Interestingly, Paul was quoting a line that was well known in the Greek world. It is usually traced to the Greek playwright Menander. Even the pagans knew this was true! You become like the people you spend your time with.

Notice that Paul begins with *“Do not be deceived.”* That tells us something important. Most of us think we are the exception. *They won’t influence me. I’m strong enough. I’m only listening, I’m not agreeing.* But Paul says that thinking is itself a deception. Corruption doesn’t announce itself. It happens slowly, through company.

The word for “corrupts” is *phtheirō*, which means to ruin, spoil, or decay. It’s the word for something rotting. And “good habits” can also be translated “good character” or “good morals.” Bad company doesn’t just give you bad ideas. Over time, it rots good character.

The wisdom of Proverbs

Solomon said the same thing again and again:

“He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed” {Proverbs 13:20}.

“Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go, lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul” {Proverbs 22:24–25}.

Notice the phrase *“lest you learn his ways.”* We learn from the people we walk with, often without realizing it. Their attitudes become our attitudes. Their humor becomes our humor. What shocks them stops shocking us. What they laugh at, we laugh at.

The very first psalm describes how this happens step by step:

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful” {Psalm 1:1}.

Look at the progression. First you *walk* by, listening to ungodly counsel. Then you *stand* in the path of sinners, lingering. Then you *sit* in the seat of the scornful, settled and comfortable, mocking the very things you once held dear. That is how drift happens. Nobody starts by sitting with scoffers. They start by walking past and listening.

A king who listened to the wrong voices

One of the clearest examples of this in Scripture is King Rehoboam, Solomon’s son.

When he became king, the people came and asked him to lighten the heavy burden his father had put on them. Rehoboam first asked the older men who had served

Solomon, and they gave him wise counsel: *"If you will be a servant to these people today... and speak good words to them, then they will be your servants forever"* {1 Kings 12:7}.

"But he rejected the advice which the elders had given him, and consulted the young men who had grown up with him, who stood before him" {1 Kings 12:8}.

His friends told him exactly what his pride wanted to hear: be harsh, show them who's in charge. He listened to them, and the kingdom of Israel split in two, never to be fully reunited {1 Kings 12:16–19}.

Rehoboam had access to wisdom. He chose the voices that were familiar, comfortable, and flattering instead. And it cost him almost everything.

Another sad example is Amnon, a son of David, who had a friend named Jonadab. The Bible describes Jonadab as *"a very crafty man"* {2 Samuel 13:3}. When Amnon confided his sinful desire, his friend didn't warn him. He helped him make a plan. And that plan led to terrible sin and, eventually, to Amnon's death {2 Samuel 13:1–29}.

Some friends help us flee from sin. Others help us plan it.

The voices of our day

In Bible times, the voices that shaped you were mostly the people physically around you. Today, there are more voices in our lives than at any time in human history. Podcasts. Influencers. Streaming shows. Music. Group chats. Online teachers. News commentators. Algorithms that learn what we like and feed us more of it.

Many believers spend hours every day being shaped by voices that do not fear God, and minutes a week being shaped by His Word and His people. And then they wonder why they feel confused, anxious, or far from Him.

Here are some honest questions to ask:

- Which voices do I hear most in an ordinary week?
- Do they draw me closer to God or make Him seem smaller and less important?
- After I listen to them, am I more eager to obey God, or more comfortable with sin?
- Do they make me more grateful, or more discontent? More humble, or more proud? More loving, or more bitter?
- Would I be comfortable if Jesus were sitting next to me while I listened?

This applies to Christian voices too. Not everyone who uses the name of Jesus speaks for Him. That is why we must learn to discern.

Two kinds of wisdom

James gives us one of the clearest tools in the Bible for telling godly wisdom from corrupt wisdom:

"But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual,

demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" {James 3:14–17}.

James says there are two kinds of wisdom in the world, and they come from two different places.

Corrupt wisdom is *"earthly, sensual, demonic."* Earthly means it only sees this life. Sensual means it is driven by feelings and appetites. Demonic means that behind it, at the root, is the enemy himself. And you can recognize it by its fruit: *"envy and self-seeking… confusion and every evil thing."*

Godly wisdom is *"first pure."* Notice the order. Before it is peaceable, before it is gentle, it is pure. Much of what passes for wisdom today is gentle and peaceable but not pure. It wants peace at any price, even the price of truth. But God's wisdom starts with purity, and then it is peaceable, gentle, merciful, and sincere.

Paul adds another warning: *"Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ"* {Colossians 2:8}. And: *"For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God"* {1 Corinthians 3:19}.

How to discern corrupt wisdom

So how do we recognize corrupt wisdom when we hear it? Here are some questions drawn from Scripture:

1. **Does it agree with the whole Word of God?** Not just a verse or two taken out of context, but the full counsel of God {Acts 20:27}. Corrupt wisdom often quotes Scripture selectively, just as Satan did with Jesus {Matthew 4:6}.

2. **Who does it exalt?** Godly wisdom makes much of Christ. Corrupt wisdom makes much of self: your truth, your feelings, your desires, your brand.

3. **What does it do with sin?** Corrupt wisdom makes sin smaller and God smaller. Godly wisdom takes both seriously.

4. **Does it call for repentance and humility?** Or does it only flatter and affirm? Remember the false prophets who cried “Peace, peace.”

5. **What is its fruit?** James says corrupt wisdom produces envy, self-seeking, and confusion. Does this voice leave you anxious, proud, bitter, and unsettled, or settled in God’s truth?

6. **Is it pure first?** Or is it gentle and pleasant while quietly compromising God’s standards?

7. **Does it point you to God’s Word, or replace it?** A trustworthy voice sends you back to the Scriptures, like the Bereans {Acts 17:11}. An untrustworthy voice asks you to trust it instead.

“Come out from among them”

This brings us to one of the most important and misunderstood commands in the New Testament:

"Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God… Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.' 'I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty'" {2 Corinthians 6:14–18}.

Did you catch the question Paul asks? *"What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?"* There is that word again, *anomia*. The believer and the lawless world are walking in two different directions.

So what did God mean when He said, *"Come out from among them"*?

First, let's be clear about what He did *not* mean. He did not mean that Christians should withdraw from the world and live in isolation. Paul says this directly in another letter: he did not mean that believers should have no contact with the sexually immoral people of this world, *"since then you would need to go out of the world"* {1 Corinthians 5:9–10}. Jesus prayed, *"I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one"* {John 17:15}. We are sent into the world as salt and light {Matthew 5:13–16}. We still work alongside unbelievers, love our neighbors, and share the gospel with them.

What "come out" means is this:

Don't be yoked. A yoke bound two animals together so that they had to walk in the same direction and pull the same load. God's Law forbade yoking an ox and a donkey together {Deuteronomy 22:10}, because they were mismatched and would pull against each other. Paul applies that picture to any binding relationship where a believer is joined to an unbeliever in a way that shapes the direction of their life: the closest partnerships, alliances, and especially marriage {1 Corinthians 7:39}.

Don't participate. "Do not touch what is unclean." We can be among people without joining in what they do. *"And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness"* {Ephesians 5:11}.

Be distinct. "Be separate" means that our values, our speech, our entertainment, and our priorities should look different from the world's. Not strange for the sake of being strange, but holy because He is holy {1 Peter 1:15–16}.

And look at the promise attached: *"I will receive you… I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters."* God doesn't call us out to leave us lonely. He calls us out to bring us close.

The call echoes all the way to the end of the Bible. When God judges the great Babylon of the last days, the system of the world in rebellion against Him, a voice from heaven cries out: *"Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues"* {Revelation 18:4}.

“Not even to eat with such a person”

Now we come to the hardest part of this chapter. And I want to handle it carefully, because it is easy to misunderstand and easy to misuse.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church:

*“But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—**not even to eat with such a person**”* {1 Corinthians 5:11}.

That doesn’t sound loving to modern ears. Not even share a meal? Isn’t that harsh? Isn’t that exactly the kind of judgment we are told to avoid?

But this is God’s instruction. And as we have seen throughout this book, God’s instructions are always given in love, even when they don’t feel loving to us.

Let’s look carefully at who this applies to and why.

It applies to someone “named a brother.” Paul is not talking about unbelievers. He has just said that we are not to withdraw from the immoral people of the world {1 Corinthians 5:10}. This is about a person who claims to be a follower of Christ.

It applies to willful, ongoing, unrepentant sin. The man in 1 Corinthians 5 was openly living in sexual sin, and the church knew it {1 Corinthians 5:1}. This is not about a believer who stumbles and repents. It is not about a believer who is struggling against temptation and fighting it. It is

about someone who calls himself a Christian while continuing in sin he has no intention of leaving, and who has refused correction.

It comes after other steps. Jesus gave a process in Matthew 18: go privately, then with one or two others, then to the church {Matthew 18:15–17}. Only when a person refuses to listen even to the church does Jesus say, *"let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector"* {Matthew 18:17}. This is not something one individual decides to do on a whim. It is the last step of a patient, loving, church-wide process, normally guided by godly leadership.

Paul gives the same instruction in other places. *"But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us"* {2 Thessalonians 3:6}. *"Note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them"* {Romans 16:17}.

Why a meal?

Why does Paul single out eating together? Because in that culture, sharing a meal was a sign of acceptance, friendship, and fellowship. To sit at someone's table was to say, "We are one. Everything is well between us." (That is part of why the Pharisees were so offended that Jesus ate with sinners.)

So when a professing believer persists in willful sin and refuses all correction, continuing to share that kind of fellowship with them sends a false message. It says, *"Everything is fine between you and God, and between you and us."* And everything is not fine.

To keep eating with them as if nothing were wrong would be to say “Peace, peace” when there is no peace.

The purpose: that they may be saved

This is the most important part to understand. The goal of this instruction is never punishment for its own sake. It is never revenge, and it is never to make ourselves feel righteous. The goal is restoration and salvation.

Look at what Paul says the purpose is: *“deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, **that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus**”* {1 Corinthians 5:5}.

The purpose is *“that his spirit may be saved.”*

And in 2 Thessalonians: *“And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, **that he may be ashamed**. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother”* {2 Thessalonians 3:14–15}.

“That he may be ashamed” is not about humiliation. It is about the kind of godly sorrow that wakes a person up. As long as a person in willful sin is surrounded by Christians who treat them as if nothing is wrong, they may never feel the weight of where they are. But when the fellowship they once enjoyed is withdrawn, they begin to feel what they have lost. And that ache may be the very thing that turns them home.

Think of the prodigal son. His father didn’t chase him to the far country with money and supplies to make his

rebellion more comfortable. He let him go. And it was in the pigpen, hungry and alone, that the son *"came to himself"* {Luke 15:17}. The father's love was there the whole time, waiting with open arms. But he did not shield his son from the consequences that brought him back.

And notice: *"do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."* We don't stop loving them. We don't stop praying for them. We don't slander them or treat them with cruelty. We still speak to them with the purpose of calling them home. The door is always open.

When they come home

And here is the beautiful ending. Many scholars believe that the man Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 5 is the same man he mentions in his second letter. Whether or not that is so, Paul's instructions in 2 Corinthians show us what happens when a disciplined believer repents:

"This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him" {2 Corinthians 2:6–8}.

When the person repents, the church must not hold back. Forgive. Comfort. Reaffirm your love. Welcome them back to the table. The goal was never to keep them out. It was always to bring them home.

A few cautions

Because this instruction is so serious, it needs a few careful cautions:

- **This is for unrepentant, willful sin by a professing believer**, not for someone who is struggling, fighting, and repenting.
- **This is for the church, not for personal grudges.** It should follow the steps Jesus gave in Matthew 18, with godly leadership involved, and never be used to punish someone we simply dislike or disagree with.
- **Family relationships require wisdom.** Scripture still commands us to honor parents, to love our spouses, and to care for our households {Ephesians 5:25; 6:1–4; 1 Timothy 5:8}. How this instruction applies within a marriage or a home calls for much prayer and wise pastoral counsel.
- **The goal is always restoration.** If our hearts are not grieving and praying for the person's return, something is wrong with *our* hearts.
- **We must examine ourselves first.** *"Considering yourself lest you also be tempted"* {Galatians 6:1}.

This is one of the hardest things God asks of His church. It does not feel loving. But it is love: love for the person, love for the church, and love for the name of Christ. And Scripture says it may be the very thing that saves them.

Examine Yourself

1. Make an honest list of the voices that have shaped your thinking most in the last month. Which ones

are drawing you toward God, and which are drawing you away?

2. Read James 3:13–18. Think of a message or teaching you have been hearing lately. Is it “first pure”? What fruit does it produce?

3. Is there a relationship or partnership in your life where you are “unequally yoked”? What would it look like to “come out from among them” in that area while still loving the people involved?

4. Read 1 Corinthians 5:1–13 and 2 Corinthians 2:5–8. How does seeing the purpose of church discipline (that they may be saved) change the way you understand it?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Walking in the Love of God

"He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked."

{1 John 2:6}

Everything we have studied so far could stay in our heads. We could agree with every word, underline every verse, and still go on living exactly as we did before. In fact, that may be the greatest danger of a book like this.

James warned us about it: *"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves"* {James 1:22}. He compared the person who hears God's Word but doesn't do it to a man who looks at his face in a mirror, walks away, and immediately forgets what he looks like {James 1:23–24}.

So, in this chapter, I want to bring everything down to everyday life. What does it actually look like to walk in the love of God, the love that keeps His commandments, on an ordinary Tuesday?

John uses the word "walk" on purpose. Walking is not a single event. It is step after step, day after day. It isn't dramatic. It's ordinary. And that is exactly where love for God is proven.

It begins by listening

The most important prayer in Jewish life, recited every morning and evening for thousands of years, begins with one word: *Shema*. "Hear."

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" {Deuteronomy 6:4–5}.

The Hebrew word *shama* means to hear, but it means more than letting sound reach your ears. It means to listen, to pay attention, and to respond. In many places in the Old Testament, the same word is translated "obey." In Hebrew thinking, if you heard and didn't act, you hadn't really heard.

Notice that the command to love God begins with a command to hear Him. You cannot love someone you don't listen to. And you can't keep commandments you don't know.

Right after the Shema, Moses says: *"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up"* {Deuteronomy 6:6–7}.

God's Word was meant to fill ordinary life: the kitchen table, the car ride, bedtime, and the morning routine.

So, the first practical step in walking in the love of God is simply this: **get into His Word every day.** Not as a chore

to check off, but as the way you hear the voice of the One you love. Read it. Think about it. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what it means and what He wants you to do with it.

Mary of Bethany *"sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word"* {Luke 10:39}, and Jesus said she had chosen *"that good part, which will not be taken away from her"* {Luke 10:42}. Love starts at His feet.

Obey quickly

The psalmist wrote, *"I made haste, and did not delay to keep Your commandments"* {Psalm 119:60}.

Delayed obedience is often just disobedience with a calendar. We tell ourselves we will forgive that person *eventually*. We will deal with that habit *after* this busy season. We will have that conversation *someday*. And someday becomes never.

When God shows you something in His Word, or when the Holy Spirit puts His finger on something in your heart, the most loving response is to act on it right away. The longer we wait, the harder our hearts become {Hebrews 3:13, 15}.

Abraham is a beautiful example. When God told him to take Isaac to Mount Moriah, the Bible says, *"So Abraham rose early in the morning"* {Genesis 22:3}. It was the hardest command he had ever received, and he obeyed it first thing in the morning.

Be faithful in small things

Jesus said, *"He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much"* {Luke 16:10}.

Most of the time, love for God won't be tested by dramatic choices. It will be tested by small ones. Telling the whole truth when a half-truth would be easier. Giving your full effort at work when no one is watching {Colossians 3:23}. Turning off something you know you shouldn't be watching. Speaking kindly about someone who isn't in the room. Keeping a promise that has become inconvenient {Psalm 15:4}.

These small acts of obedience are like the threads in a tapestry. No single thread looks impressive. But together, over time, they make something beautiful.

Love God where He says to

God's commandments touch every part of our lives. Walking in His love means letting Him into all of it, not just the parts that are easy or the parts we show at church. Here are a few areas Scripture speaks to clearly.

In your speech. *"Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers"* {Ephesians 4:29}. Gossip, complaining, harshness, and dishonesty are not small things to God.

In your relationships. *"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you"* {Ephesians 4:32}. Unforgiveness is one of the

most common ways believers disobey God while feeling justified about it.

In your body and sexuality. *"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor"* {1 Thessalonians 4:3–4}. God's design is not a restriction on love. It is a protection for it.

In your money. *"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil"* {1 Timothy 6:10}. Generosity, honesty in business, and contentment are all part of walking in God's love. Remember Zacchaeus.

In your home. *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her"* {Ephesians 5:25}. *"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right"* {Ephesians 6:1}. *"And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord"* {Ephesians 6:4}. (There is that word *paideia* again: the training of the Lord.)

In your neighbor's need. *"But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?"* {1 John 3:17}.

None of us does all of this perfectly. But walking in the love of God means we stop treating any area of life as off-limits to Him.

Love one another

It's worth remembering how John introduced 1 John 5:3. He said, *"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments"* {1 John 5:2}.

In John's mind, love for God and love for His people are inseparable. *"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"* {1 John 4:20}.

This is a good safeguard against the danger we talked about in Chapter 10: discernment without love. A person who is zealous about God's commandments but cold toward God's people has misunderstood the commandments. Jesus said, *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"* {John 13:34–35}.

So walking in the love of God looks like showing up for your church family. Bearing with one another's weaknesses. Serving. Encouraging. Forgiving. Being patient with people who are still growing, just as God has been patient with you. And yes, speaking the truth in love when that is what love requires.

Love and the fear of the Lord

Our culture assumes that love and fear can't go together. But Scripture puts them side by side again and again.

"And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him" {Deuteronomy 10:12}.

The fear of the Lord is not terror. It's not the fear of a slave who expects to be beaten. John says, *"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment"* {1 John 4:18}. That kind of tormenting fear has no place in the heart of a child of God.

But there is another kind of fear: a deep reverence, an awe of God's holiness, a trembling respect that takes Him and His Word seriously. *"On this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word"* {Isaiah 66:2}.

That holy fear doesn't push us away from God. It draws us close. *"The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant"* {Psalm 25:14}.

Think about a child with a good father. That child isn't terrified of him. She runs to him, climbs into his lap, and tells him everything. But she also respects him deeply, and the thought of disappointing him matters to her. That is love and fear together. That is how God's children are meant to walk with Him.

Greater is He

There is a sentence I hear from sincere believers more often than almost any other when the subject of obedience comes up: "I just can't."

“I can’t stop.” “I can’t forgive.” “I can’t control my mouth.” “I’m only human.” “Nobody can keep all of God’s commandments.”

It sounds humble. But I want to ask a question, as gently and as clearly as I can: **Do we believe what God has said?**

John wrote to believers, *“You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because **He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world**”* {1 John 4:4}.

Do we believe that? If the Spirit of the living God lives inside of us, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead {Romans 8:11}, then how can we say that we are not able to do what He tells us to do? Either He is greater, or He isn’t. And the Word of God says He is.

Everything we need

Peter tells us that God has not left us under-equipped:

*“As His divine power has given to us **all things that pertain to life and godliness**, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue”* {2 Peter 1:3}.

Not some things. *All* things. Everything we need to live a godly life has already been given to us through Christ. God has never commanded His children to do something and then refused to give them the power to do it.

Paul says it this way: *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”* {Philippians 4:13}. And we have already seen God’s promise that no temptation will ever be greater than the way of escape He provides {1 Corinthians 10:13}.

This matters, because one day each of us will stand before the Lord. *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad"* {2 Corinthians 5:10}. Jesus said that even our words will be weighed: *"But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment"* {Matthew 12:36}.

On that day, "I couldn't" will not stand. Not because God expects us to have done it in our own strength, but because He gave us His own Spirit, His Word, and all things that pertain to life and godliness. We will not be able to say that He failed to equip us. We are without excuse.

Not in our own strength

Now, please hear the other half of this, because it is just as important. We do not do this on our own.

Jesus said, *"Without Me you can do nothing"* {John 15:5}. Nothing. If you try to keep God's commandments in your own willpower, you will fail, and you will end up either proud or discouraged.

But we are not on our own. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit as our Helper {John 14:16}, and He is the One who empowers us to obey. *"He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake"* {Psalm 23:3}. *"Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh"* {Galatians 5:16}.

So the truth has two sides, and we need both. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. With Him, we can walk in victory.

"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" {1 Corinthians 15:57}. *"Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us"* {Romans 8:37}.

Sin is no longer your master

Before we came to Christ, sin was our master. We couldn't simply decide to stop. We were slaves. But something happened at the cross that changed that forever.

"Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, ***that we should no longer be slaves of sin****"* {Romans 6:6}.

"For sin shall not have dominion over you" {Romans 6:14}.

As we saw in Chapter 6, Paul says there are only two masters. *"Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?"* {Romans 6:16}. There is no third option. You are either a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness.

And for the believer, Paul says the matter is settled: *"But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life"* {Romans 6:22}.

So when a believer says, "I can't help it," they are, without meaning to, speaking as if sin were still their master. But it isn't. Its chains have been broken. You may

still feel its pull, but it no longer has the right to command you. **You can say no.**

It starts with submission

So how do we actually resist temptation? James gives us the order:

"Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you" {James 4:7}.

Notice what comes first. Before we resist the devil, we submit to God. Many believers try to resist temptation while still holding on to their own way in other areas of life. They want victory over one sin without surrendering the whole heart. But the power to resist flows out of submission.

And submission to God always means submission to His Word. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He answered every temptation the same way: *"It is written"* {Matthew 4:4, 7, 10}. He didn't argue with the devil. He didn't rely on how He felt. He stood on what God had said. The Word of God is *"the sword of the Spirit"* {Ephesians 6:17}, and Jesus used it.

The psalmist knew this secret: *"Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You"* {Psalm 119:11}.

So here is the path to victory, simply put:

1. **Submit to God.** Surrender every area of your life, not just the one you are struggling with.

2. **Fill your heart with His Word.** You can't use a sword you don't carry.
3. **Depend on the Holy Spirit.** Ask Him for strength in the moment of temptation, not just afterward.
4. **Resist.** Say no, out loud if you need to, and take the way of escape God provides.
5. **Believe what God says about you.** You are not a slave to sin. Greater is He who is in you.

This is not perfectionism. As we'll see in a moment, believers still stumble, and there is grace when we do. But it is the end of excuses. The question is no longer "Can I?" God has already answered that. The question is "Will I?"

When you stumble

You will stumble. I will too. Walking in the love of God does not mean we will never fail. It means we know what to do when we do.

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" {1 John 1:9}.

The word "confess" is *homologeō*, which literally means "to say the same thing." To confess our sin is to agree with God about it. Not to excuse it, explain it, or minimize it, but to call it what He calls it.

And when we do, He forgives. Completely. Not grudgingly. Not partially. He is faithful to forgive and just to cleanse, because Jesus has already paid for that sin in full.

"For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again" {Proverbs 24:16}. The righteous person in that verse is not the one who never falls. It's the one who keeps getting back up.

So don't let failure send you into hiding. That was Adam and Eve's response after the first sin: they hid from God {Genesis 3:8}. Instead, run toward Him. Confess quickly. Receive His forgiveness. And take the next step of obedience.

Abiding

The secret to all of this is not trying harder. It is staying close.

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" {John 15:4–5}.

A branch doesn't strain to produce grapes. It simply stays connected to the vine, and the life of the vine flows through it. In the same way, obedience is not something we produce by gritting our teeth. It is the fruit of staying connected to Jesus.

And remember what Jesus said a few verses later: *"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love"* {John 15:10}. Abiding produces obedience, and obedience keeps

us abiding. It is a beautiful circle. The closer we stay to Him, the more we want to obey. The more we obey, the closer we stay.

Rooted to the end

We began this book with Jesus' warning that in the last days, *"because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold"* {Matthew 24:12}. But Jesus didn't stop there. The very next words out of His mouth were a promise:

"But he who endures to the end shall be saved" {Matthew 24:13}.

The love of *many* will grow cold. But not everyone's. There will be those who endure. And I want you to be one of them.

The Greek word for endurance in the New Testament is *hypomonē*. It literally means "to remain under." It is the strength to stay put when everything around you is pushing you to move. It is not a grim, white-knuckled survival. It is the steady faithfulness of someone who knows where they are planted and refuses to be uprooted.

You know a tree by its fruit

Jesus used a picture that every farmer in Galilee understood:

"Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ***A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit****"* {Matthew 7:17–18}.

Notice the word *cannot*. Jesus didn't say a good tree *usually* bears good fruit. He said it *cannot* bear bad fruit, and a bad tree *cannot* bear good fruit. Fruit doesn't decide what kind of tree it is. The tree decides what kind of fruit it bears. Fruit simply reveals what is already true about the root.

An apple tree may have a bruised apple now and then, but it will never grow thorns. And a thornbush will never produce a single apple, no matter how hard it tries. *"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit"* {Matthew 12:33}.

This is so encouraging, because it means that the answer to bad fruit is never to tie plastic apples onto a thornbush. The answer is a new tree. And that is exactly what God does when He makes us new. In Chapter 7, we saw that we were born with a nature that bears bad fruit, which is why we must be born again. When God gives us a new heart, He makes the tree good. And a good tree, rooted in Him, will bear good fruit.

So if you have been born again, don't strain and strive to manufacture fruit. Stay rooted. The fruit will come.

Rooted in love, rooted in the Word

Where should our roots go? Scripture gives two answers, and they belong together.

We are to be rooted in **His love**. Paul prayed *"that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth*

and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge" {Ephesians 3:17–19}. Not the world's love. Not lawless love. The true love of God that we have been studying in this book: the love that gave His Son, the love that corrects, the love that keeps His commandments.

And we are to be rooted in **His Word**. *"As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving"* {Colossians 2:6–7}.

Jeremiah gives us a beautiful picture of what that kind of life looks like:

"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose hope is the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; but its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit" {Jeremiah 17:7–8}.

Look at that tree. The heat still comes. The drought still comes. But the tree is not afraid, because its roots go down to the river. Its leaves stay green. It never stops bearing fruit.

That is what endurance looks like. Not a life without heat and drought, but a life with roots deep enough that the heat and the drought can't kill it.

The seed that kept going

In the parable of the sower, Jesus described seed that fell on rocky ground. It sprang up quickly, but *"these have no root,*

who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away" {Luke 8:13}.

They believed. For a while. But they had no root, and when the heat came, they withered.

Then Jesus described the good ground: *"But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart,* ***keep it and bear fruit with patience****"* {Luke 8:15}.

There is our word again: *keep*. They heard the Word, and they held onto it. And they bore fruit *with patience*, which is that same word *hypomonē*, endurance. The fruit didn't appear overnight. It came over a lifetime of keeping God's Word.

And when you are fruitful, don't be surprised if you feel the pruning knife. Jesus said, *"Every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit"* {John 15:2}. The Father's correction, as we saw in Chapter 5, is not a sign that you are failing. It is a sign that He is growing you.

Don't lose heart

If you are weary, hear these words from the Lord:

"And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" {Galatians 6:9}.

"For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise" {Hebrews 10:36}.

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" {1 Corinthians 15:58}.

"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" {Revelation 2:10}.

And remember who is running this race with you. *"Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith"* {Hebrews 12:1–2}. He started this work in you, and He intends to finish it. *"He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ"* {Philippians 1:6}.

At the end of his life, Paul could look back and say, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have* ***kept*** *the faith"* {2 Timothy 4:7}. That word "kept" is *tēreō*, the very same word John used in 1 John 5:3: *"this is the love of God, that we* ***keep*** *His commandments."* Paul kept. He guarded what God had given him, all the way to the finish line.

The world's love will keep growing colder. The voices will keep getting louder. Lawlessness will keep abounding. But you don't have to go with it. Stay rooted in His love. Stay planted by the river of His Word. Keep His commandments. Keep the faith. And the God who keeps you will bring you safely home.

The joy of it

I want to end this chapter where Jesus ended His teaching on abiding and obedience: *"These things I have spoken to*

you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full" {John 15:11}.

The end goal of obedience is not misery. It is joy. Full joy. Jesus' own joy, living in us.

Psalm 1 describes the person who walks in God's ways as *"blessed,"* and says, *"His delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper"* {Psalm 1:2–3}.

That is the life of someone who walks in the love of God. Not a life of heavy burdens, but a life of deep roots, steady fruit, and green leaves in every season.

His commandments are not burdensome. They are the path to the fullest joy a human heart can know.

Examine Yourself

1. What does your daily time of "hearing" God's Word look like right now? What one change could you make this week to listen to Him more closely?

2. Is there something God has shown you that you have been putting off obeying? What would it look like to "make haste" this week?

3. Look at the list of areas under "Love God where He says to." Which area have you been keeping off-limits to Him?

4. Read John 15:1–11. What would it look like for you to abide more closely in Jesus this week?

Conclusion:

The Love That Keeps

“But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.”

{Jude 20–21}

We began this book with two of the most quoted phrases in the Bible: “God is love” and “Judge not.” I hope you now see them differently.

“God is love” is not a slogan that makes God agreeable to whatever we want. It is the most glorious truth in the universe. It tells us that the holy God, who has every right to condemn us, sent His Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. And the same apostle who wrote those words told us what loving God back looks like: *“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome”* {1 John 5:3}.

“Judge not” is not a gag order on the church. It is a warning against hypocrisy, harshness, and pride. The same Jesus who said it also told us to remove the plank so that we can see clearly to help our brother, to beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing, and to judge with righteous judgment.

Love doesn't close its eyes. It opens them, and then it speaks the truth gently.

When we put these two truths back where they belong, something beautiful happens. Love gets its backbone back. And judgment gets its heart back.

Keeping and being kept

There is a word that has followed us all through this book: *keep*. We have seen that the love of God is to keep His commandments {1 John 5:3}. That those who love Jesus will keep His word {John 14:23}. That keeping means guarding and treasuring, the way Adam was to keep the garden.

But I want to end with the other side of that word, because it is the side that makes everything else possible.

On the night before the cross, Jesus prayed for His disciples: *"Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me… While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name"* {John 17:11–12}.

And Jude, after telling us to keep ourselves in the love of God, ends his letter with this:

"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen" {Jude 24–25}.

Do you see it? We are called to keep His commandments, and to keep ourselves in His love. But the One who calls us is the One who keeps us. Jude uses a different Greek word in

verse 24, *phylassō*, which means to guard like a sentry on watch. God Himself stands guard over His children. He is able to keep us from stumbling. He is able to present us faultless, with exceeding joy. We are just called to abide in Him.

That is why His commandments are not burdensome. We do not walk this road alone, and we do not walk it in our own strength. The God who commands is the God who keeps. *"He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it"* {1 Thessalonians 5:24}.

If you are not sure

Perhaps as you have read this book, you have realized that you have never truly known this love. Maybe you have been in church for years, or maybe you have never been at all. Maybe you have believed in a God who loves without asking anything, and you are now seeing that He is far greater, and far more holy, than you imagined.

If so, the door is open. *"The Lord is… longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"* {2 Peter 3:9}.

The first words of Jesus' public ministry are still His invitation today: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* {Matthew 4:17}. To repent is to turn: to stop going your own way and turn toward God. To believe is to trust Jesus completely as the One who died for your sins and rose again, and to receive Him as your Lord. *"That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved"* {Romans 10:9}.

You don't have to clean yourself up first. Remember Zacchaeus. Remember the woman Jesus refused to condemn. Grace comes to you as you are. And then, if you will let Him, it will make you new. *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new"* {2 Corinthians 5:17}.

Talk to Him today. Tell Him you have sinned. Tell Him you want to turn from it. Ask Him to be your Savior and your Lord. And then find a Bible-believing church and a mature believer who can help you take your first steps of obedience. He who comes to Him, He will by no means cast out {John 6:37}.

If you have drifted

Perhaps you have known the Lord for a long time, but as you read, you realized that you have drifted into a softer, more comfortable love. You have let "God knows my heart" stand in for obedience. You have quoted "Judge not" to silence the voice of the Holy Spirit. You have resisted the people He sent to tell you the truth.

If so, hear the words Jesus spoke to a church that had left its first love: *"Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works"* {Revelation 2:5}.

Remember. Repent. Return. He is not finished with you. His rebuke is the proof that He loves you {Revelation 3:19}. And His arms are open.

If you have been harsh

And perhaps, as you read the chapters on judgment, you saw yourself in the man with the plank in his eye. You have

known the truth, but you have used it as a weapon. You have been quick to see specks and slow to see beams. You have been right, but you have not been loving.

If so, the same grace is there for you. Humble yourself. Ask forgiveness from the people you have wounded. And ask God to fill your truth with His love, so that your words will heal and not only cut. *"And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love"* {1 Corinthians 13:13}.

The love of God

I want to leave you with the verse that started this book, and ask you to read it one more time, slowly, as if for the first time:

"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" {1 John 5:3–4}.

This is not a heavy verse. It is a victorious one. It tells us that those who are born of God can love Him the way He asked to be loved, because He has given us new hearts, His own Spirit, and a faith that overcomes the world.

The world will keep redefining love. It will keep quoting "Judge not" to anyone who dares to call sin sin. But we don't have to take our definitions from the world. We have the Word of God. And the Word of God tells us that love is a Father who corrects, a Savior who says "Go and sin no more," a Spirit who leads us into all truth, and a people who keep His commandments with joy.

That is the love of God. It is better than anything the world has ever offered. And it is ours.

Examine Yourself

1. How has your understanding of “God is love” changed since you began this book?
2. How has your understanding of “Judge not” changed?
3. Which of the three groups in this chapter (not sure, drifted, or harsh) do you most see yourself in? What is your next step?
4. Write down one commandment of God that you will commit to keeping with fresh love this week. Share it with someone who will pray for you.

A Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for loving me first. Thank You for loving me when I was far from You, and for sending Your Son to be the sacrifice for my sins. I don’t want a love that I have made up. I want Your love, as it really is.

Forgive me for the times I have made Your love small and convenient. Forgive me for the times I used “Judge not” to hide from Your correction, and for the times I judged others harshly while ignoring my own sin.

Write Your law on my heart. Fill me with Your Spirit. Teach me to treasure Your commandments and to keep

them with joy. When You correct me, help me not to despise it or lose heart, but to receive it as the love of a Father. Give me clear eyes and a gentle heart, so that I can speak the truth in love to those around me.

Keep me in Your love. Keep me from stumbling. And present me faultless before Your presence with exceeding joy.

In the name of Jesus Christ, my Savior and my Lord. Amen.

Seven Days:

A Devotional for Returning to the Lord

“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”

{Isaiah 55:7}

This devotional is for anyone who has read this book and sensed the Holy Spirit tugging at their heart. Maybe you have recognized lawless love in your own life. Maybe you have been listening to the wrong voices, or believing lies about God, about sin, or about yourself. Maybe you simply know that you need to come back to the Lord with your whole heart.

Over the next seven days, we will walk step by step through genuine repentance and confession, ask God to deliver us from the lies of the enemy, and seek Him for wisdom and discernment.

Each day has a Scripture passage to read, a short reflection, a prayer, and a simple step to respond. Set aside a quiet time each day, ideally at the same time. Keep a journal or notebook nearby. Read the passage slowly. Pray

the prayer out loud if you can, and then keep talking to the Lord in your own words. And don’t rush. This is not a checklist. It is a conversation with the Father who is running to meet you.

Day 1: Come Home

Read: Luke 15:11–24

"But when he came to himself, he said… 'I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you."'… But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him." {Luke 15:17–18, 20}

Every journey home begins with a moment of honesty. The prodigal son had wasted everything. He was hungry, ashamed, and feeding pigs in a far country. And then the Bible says, *"he came to himself."* He woke up. He saw where he was, and he remembered where he belonged.

Maybe this book has been that moment for you. Maybe you have realized that you are further from the Father than you thought.

Notice what the son did not do. He didn't wait until he had cleaned himself up. He didn't try to earn his way back. He simply got up and started walking home, rehearsing his confession.

And notice what the father did. He was watching. He saw his son *"when he was still a great way off."* And he ran. In that culture, a dignified older man did not run. But this father ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him before the boy could even finish his speech.

That is the heart of God toward you today. He is not waiting with crossed arms. He is running toward you with open ones.

The first step of repentance is simply to turn around and come home.

Pray: Father, I have been in a far country. I have gone my own way, listened to other voices, and wandered from You. Today I am coming home. Thank You that You are watching for me, that You see me even from far away, and that You run to meet me. I don't come with anything to offer You except my need. Receive me, Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Respond: In your journal, write a few honest sentences describing where you are spiritually right now. Don't dress it up. Then write: "Today I am coming home."

Day 2: Search Me

Read: Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24; Jeremiah 17:9–10

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." {Psalm 139:23–24}

We cannot repent of what we refuse to see. And the trouble is, we often can't see ourselves clearly. *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"* {Jeremiah 17:9}.

That is why David didn't just examine himself. He asked God to examine him. He invited the One who knows him completely (*"You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off"* {Psalm 139:2}) to shine His light into every corner of his heart.

This is a brave prayer. It means letting God show us things we may have hidden even from ourselves: a bitterness we have excused, a habit we have called harmless, a relationship we have refused to give up, a lie we have believed for years, a voice we have let shape us more than His Word.

But it is a safe prayer, because the One who searches us is the same One who loves us. He doesn't search us to condemn us. He searches us to *"lead me in the way everlasting."* The searching is for the sake of the leading.

Pray: Lord, search me. I give You permission to look into every part of my heart. Show me anything in me that grieves You: any sin I have excused, any lie I have believed, any voice I have trusted more than Yours. I don't want to hide

anything from You anymore. Show me, and then lead me in the way everlasting. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Respond: Sit quietly for at least ten minutes with a pen in your hand. Pray Psalm 139:23–24 slowly, and write down whatever the Holy Spirit brings to mind. Don't argue with it or explain it. Just write it down. You will bring this list to the Lord tomorrow.

Day 3: Agree With God

Read: Psalm 32:1–7; 1 John 1:5–9; Proverbs 28:13

"I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and You forgave the iniquity of my sin." {Psalm 32:5}

David knew what it was like to hide sin. He described it this way: *"When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me"* {Psalm 32:3–4}. Unconfessed sin is heavy. It drains us, body and soul.

But the moment David confessed, the weight lifted. *"You forgave the iniquity of my sin."*

As we saw in Chapter 16, the word "confess" in 1 John 1:9 means "to say the same thing." To confess is to agree with God. It means calling sin by the name He gives it, not the softer names we prefer. Not "a mistake," "a weakness," or "just how I am," but sin.

"He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy" {Proverbs 28:13}. Notice the two words: *confesses* and *forsakes*. Real confession is not just admitting. It is letting go.

And hear the promise: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* {1 John 1:9}. Not some unrighteousness. All.

Pray: Take the list you wrote yesterday, and go through it one item at a time. For each one, say to the Lord: *"Father, I confess this as sin. I agree with You about it. I am not going to excuse it or explain it. Please forgive me and cleanse me."* Then thank Him: *"Thank You that You are faithful and just to forgive me. Thank You for the blood of Jesus that cleanses me from all unrighteousness."*

Respond: When you have finished confessing, write 1 John 1:9 across the top of your list. Then, as a symbol of His forgiveness, tear the list up or cross it out completely. *"As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us"* {Psalm 103:12}. If there is someone you have wronged, ask God for the courage to make it right {Matthew 5:23–24}.

Day 4: Godly Sorrow

Read: 2 Corinthians 7:8–11; Psalm 51; Joel 2:12–13

"For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death." {2 Corinthians 7:10}

There are two kinds of sorrow over sin, and they lead in opposite directions.

Worldly sorrow is sorry about the consequences. It is sorry that it got caught, sorry that it is suffering, sorry that people think less of it. It is focused on self. And Paul says it *"produces death."* It leads to shame, despair, and hiding, but not to change.

Godly sorrow is sorry about the sin itself, because it has grieved God. It looks at the cross and says, *"Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight"* {Psalm 51:4}. And godly sorrow *"produces repentance."* It leads somewhere. It turns us around.

The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means a change of mind that leads to a change of direction. It's not just feeling bad. It's turning.

God said through the prophet Joel, *"So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness"* {Joel 2:13}. In those days, people tore their clothes to show grief. God says, "I don't want a show. I want your heart."

And notice why we can return: *"for He is gracious and merciful."* Godly sorrow is never hopeless, because it always looks toward a God who is ready to forgive.

Pray: Pray Psalm 51:1–12 slowly as your own prayer. Then add: *Lord, I don't just want to feel bad about my sin. I want to turn from it. Give me godly sorrow that leads to real repentance. Change my mind and change my direction. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Respond: Read 2 Corinthians 7:11, which describes the fruit of godly sorrow: diligence, clearing of yourselves, indignation, fear, vehement desire, zeal. For each sin you confessed yesterday, write down one concrete step of turning. What will you stop? What will you start? What will you remove from your life?

Day 5: Renounce the Lies

Read: John 8:31–36, 44; 2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Ephesians 4:22–25

"If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." {John 8:31–32}

In Chapter 14, we saw that the enemy's main attack is on our minds. Jesus called him *"a liar and the father of it"* {John 8:44}. He has been whispering "Has God indeed said?" since the garden, and many of us have believed some of what he whispered.

Some of his lies are about God: *God doesn't really mean what He says. God is holding out on you. God could never love you after what you've done.*

Some are about sin: *It's not that bad. Everyone does it. This is just how God made you.*

Some are about you: *You will never change. You are too far gone. You don't need anyone telling you what to do.*

Today is a day to bring those lies into the light and replace them with the truth. Jesus didn't say that feeling free would make you free. He said *the truth* would. And the truth is found by abiding in His Word.

Paul said we are to *"put off"* the old man and *"put on"* the new {Ephesians 4:22–24}, and then immediately: *"Therefore, putting away lying, let each one of you speak truth"* {Ephesians 4:25}. That begins with the lies we tell ourselves.

Pray: Father, I renounce every lie of the enemy that I have believed. I reject the lie that Your Word doesn't mean what it says. I reject the lie that sin is harmless. I reject the lie that I am too far gone, and the lie that I cannot change. I refuse to listen any longer to voices that oppose Your truth. I take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. Deliver me from the deception of the enemy. Give me a love for the truth. Your Word is truth, and I choose to believe You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Respond: Draw a line down the middle of a page. On the left, write the lies you have believed. On the right, next to each one, write what God's Word says instead, with a Scripture reference. Keep this page somewhere you will see it often, and read the right-hand column out loud whenever the old lies come back. Then take an honest look at the voices you listen to most, and remove or reduce at least one that has been feeding those lies.

Day 6: Ask for Wisdom

Read: James 1:5–8; Proverbs 2:1–11; 1 Kings 3:5–12

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him." {James 1:5}

When God appeared to the young King Solomon and said, *"Ask! What shall I give you?"* {1 Kings 3:5}, Solomon could have asked for anything. He asked for this: *"Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil"* {1 Kings 3:9}. And Scripture says *"the speech pleased the Lord"* {1 Kings 3:10}.

God still loves that prayer. James promises that if we ask for wisdom, God gives it *"liberally and without reproach."* That means generously, and without scolding us for asking. He doesn't say, "You should have known better." He simply gives.

But James adds a condition: *"But let him ask in faith, with no doubting"* {James 1:6}. We ask for wisdom believing that God will answer, and ready to obey what He shows us.

Proverbs tells us where wisdom is found: *"For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding"* {Proverbs 2:6}. And it tells us how to look for it: as if we were searching for silver and hidden treasure {Proverbs 2:4}. Wisdom comes to those who want it badly enough to dig for it in His Word.

Remember the two kinds of wisdom from Chapter 15: one that is *"earthly, sensual, demonic,"* and one that is *"from above… first pure"* {James 3:15–17}. Today, ask God to fill you with the wisdom from above.

Pray: Lord, like Solomon, I ask You for an understanding heart. I need Your wisdom. I don't want the wisdom of this world, which is foolishness to You. Give me the wisdom that is from above: pure, peaceable, gentle, and full of mercy. Help me to discern between good and evil, between truth and lies, between Your voice and every other voice. I ask in faith, believing that You give generously. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Respond: Think of one decision or situation in your life where you need wisdom right now. Write it down. Then look up two or three Scriptures that speak to it, and write them underneath. Ask God to make His will clear, and commit in advance to obey what He shows you.

Day 7: Walk in the Light

Read: 1 John 1:5–7; Psalm 119:97–105; Hebrews 5:12–14; Philippians 1:9–11

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." {Psalm 119:105}

You have come home. You have let God search you. You have confessed your sin, turned from it, renounced the lies of the enemy, and asked for wisdom. Now the question is: how do you keep walking?

"But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" {1 John 1:7}. Walking in the light means living openly before God, with nothing hidden, every day.

And the light for that walk is His Word. A lamp in Bible times didn't light up the whole road. It lit the next few steps. That is how God often leads us: one step at a time, as we stay in His Word.

Discernment grows the same way. Hebrews says that mature believers have *"their senses exercised to discern both good and evil"* by *"reason of use"* {Hebrews 5:14}. Discernment is like a muscle. It grows stronger as you use it: reading the Word, testing what you hear, choosing what is right, day after day.

Paul's prayer for the Philippians is a perfect prayer for this new season of your life: *"that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be*

sincere and without offense till the day of Christ" {Philippians 1:9–10}.

And if you stumble along the way, don't lose heart. *"Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness"* {Lamentations 3:22–23}.

Pray: Father, thank You for bringing me home. Thank You for forgiving me, cleansing me, and setting me free. I want to walk in the light with You every day. Make Your Word a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Let my love abound more and more in knowledge and all discernment. Keep me from the lies of the enemy, and keep me rooted in Your love and Your truth. I give You my mind, my heart, my ears, and my steps. Help me to keep Your commandments, because I love You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Respond: Make a simple plan for the next thirty days: a daily time and place to read God's Word, a book of the Bible to read through (the Gospel of John or 1 John is a wonderful place to start), and one mature believer you will ask to pray with you and hold you accountable. Write the plan down, tell that person this week, and begin tomorrow morning.

Notes

A note on Greek and Hebrew words. Throughout this book, the meanings of Greek and Hebrew words are given in simplified form for everyday readers. Readers who want to go deeper may consult a standard Bible dictionary, a Greek or Hebrew lexicon, or a resource such as *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*.

Chapter 1: "God Is Love," But What Kind?

1. The Greek word *hilasmos* ("propitiation") in 1 John 4:10 is closely related to *hilastērion*, the word used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) for the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant, and in Hebrews 9:5.

Chapter 3: "If You Love Me"

1. In John 14:15, Greek manuscripts differ slightly. Some read "keep My commandments" as a command; others read "you will keep My commandments" as a promise. The NKJV follows the first; the ESV follows the second. Either way, the meaning is very close.

Chapter 6: Grace Is Not a License

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, first published in German as *Nachfolge* in 1937. The

description of “cheap grace” and “costly grace” in this chapter summarizes the book’s opening chapter and is not a direct quotation.

2. Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 and executed at the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945.

Chapter 8: The Most Quoted Verse

1. The account of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11) is not found in the earliest Greek manuscripts of John’s Gospel, and in some later manuscripts it appears in other places. The NKJV and most modern translations include it with an explanatory note.

Chapter 15: Bad Company

1. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 15:33, “Evil company corrupts good habits,” quote a line traditionally attributed to the Greek comic playwright Menander (c. 342–290 BC), from his play *Thaïs*, which survives only in fragments.

2. Some scholars identify the man restored in 2 Corinthians 2:5–8 with the man disciplined in 1 Corinthians 5; others believe Paul is describing a different situation.

About the Author

Krista D. Smith is a watchman, standard-bearer, and disciple-maker dedicated to equipping the Body of Christ. Following a successful 19-year career owning a mortgage firm, Krista answered a divine call in 2017 to close her business and realign her life fully around God's purposes. Today, she serves as President of a Christian school in South Carolina and Director at Tour of Truth, a global online ministry. With over 30 years of Bible study experience, Krista has done mission work in East and West Africa, co-established a 24/7 virtual house of prayer for Israel, and authored multiple books, including *Don't Die in the Pew,* the *Appointed Times* series, and *Sincerely Deceived.* Her life's mission is to disciple believers and encourage them to stand firm in the Word of the Lord.

Is it love… or is it lawless?

"God is love." "Judge not." They may be the two most quoted phrases in the Bible, and two of the most misunderstood.

Somewhere along the way, the church traded God's love for the world's version: a love that accepts everything, expects nothing, and never says a word of correction. Jesus warned that in the last days, "because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold." Lawless love feels warm. It sounds kind. But it leaves sincere people comfortable in the very things that are destroying them.

In *Lawless Love*, the Scriptures are opened to show what love really is. You will discover why John, the apostle of love, wrote, "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments," what Jesus actually meant by "Judge not," and why silence is not the same as kindness.

With clear teaching, honest questions, and a seven-day devotional for returning to the Lord, this book will help you trade a counterfeit love for the real thing: a love that corrects, a love that keeps, and a love worth giving your whole life to.

"The world has seen plenty of angry, self-righteous religion, and it has done great damage. If this book makes you more proud and less merciful, you have read it wrong. What I am saying is this: the love of God is better, deeper, and stronger than the version we have been sold. It is a love that saves us and then changes us. It is a love that rescues us from sin, not a love that leaves us comfortable in it."

— KRISTA D SMITH

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