

# John Writes A Letter

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*“God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we’re free of worry on Judgment Day – our standing in the world is identical with Christ’s. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life – fear of death, fear of judgment – is one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, are going to love – love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first. If anyone boasts, “I love God,” and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won’t love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can’t see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You’ve got to love both.” – 1 John 4:17-21, MSG*

## Authentic Christianity

**Loving God includes loving people. You’ve got to love both.**

John’s words on this subject are blunt and straight to the point. *“You cannot be a Christian and hate other people“*. It’s incompatible and hypocritical. Not only that, it’s a blatant subversion of everything that is intrinsically bound up in a Christian’s salvation by God’s grace. We love God, because He **first** loved us and, despite our complete unworthiness, He sent His son to die for us. There is no greater love than a man dying for his friends, and there could be no greater demonstration of what love looks like, to die, even for those who were your enemies.

*“What marvellous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it – we’re called children of God!” – 1 John 3:1, MSG*

Of all the people on this earth, it would seem obvious that Christians would understand the implications of this. We are the recipients of a love so deep and vast and completely undeserving, it should be impossible for us to not respond to this in our relationships with others. We haven’t received from God what we should have. And what we shouldn’t have received, we have. Grace, freely given, has been demonstrated by a love lavished on us in abundance. This recognition of grace should empower and transform us to demonstrate the same kind of love in all our relationships, and especially to our Christian family.

Grace is, perhaps, the easiest concept to speak about in the enthusiastic language of a born-again believer ([John 3:1-21](#)) but, in reality, the hardest virtue to assimilate into our Christian lives. Legalism, not grace, is one of the first lessons we learn in life; that all things come with a price and that nothing is given for free. We can tend to persist in this mentality after our conversion, even on an unconscious level, viewing God and each other in this light.

*“The one who won’t practice righteous ways isn’t from God, neither is the one who won’t love a brother or sister.” – 1 John 3:10, MSG*

## **Are We Really Born Again?**

There’s a serious crisis amongst Christians. It seems we can talk a lot about love, but we’re actually woefully inadequate at demonstrating it. Instead of showing real, authentic love, demonstrated in graceful, multi-faceted ways, we see the opposite in many of our Christian communities. We’re often religiously wealthy but morally bankrupt; devoid of any real expression of a grace-led life. We say we’re born again but

are we really? Has grace really touched our hearts?

Jesus told a story to illustrate what a life untransformed by grace looks like – that of the *ungrateful* servant ([Matthew 18:21-35](#)). Despite having been forgiven a massive debt of some several million dollars by his master, the servant proceeded to demand repayment of a debt owed to him by a fellow servant, of only a few dollars. When the fellow servant was unable to immediately repay, he had him thrown into prison, ‘until he could repay the debt’ – which would have been practically impossible from his prison cell. The master soon heard of the ungrateful servant’s behaviour and the conclusion of the tale is sobering:

*“Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”* [Matthew 18:32-35, ESV](#)

The parable was designed to impress upon the listeners the importance of their attitude towards each other in response to the forgiveness they had received from God. In fact, there is a direct connection between our professed love for God and our love for our ‘fellow servants’. John puts it this way:

*“Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.”* [1 John 4:20, NIV](#)

## **What Does Real Love Look Like?**

*“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it*

*is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” – 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, ESV*

These are all attributes of a life that is lived walking with God; [led by the Spirit](#). The implications of a Spirit-led life find their way into every aspect of our lives: affection for others, understanding and compassion for their failings, forgiveness of their mistakes (and our own!), confidence in God’s love and kindness, a commitment to cultivate close and loving relationships built on mutual respect and sacrifice.

These are attributes of a person who has fully grasped the weight and implications of saving grace and whose life is being transformed, day by day, following the example of the One who went before – Jesus Christ. They are choosing every day to put aside the unfruitful works of darkness and to walk in the Spirit, producing the fruit that comes from living God’s way (Galatians 5). The bright light of Christ makes their way plain.

## **Hate Will Destroy Us**

The opposite of love is hate. And let’s get real. Hate, in all its forms, whether displayed passively or aggressively, is like a poison that destroys our soul. It will ruin our life – and not just ours. It causes havoc in our families, our relationships, our churches and, critically, to our witness of the Gospel. We may think that we have never been guilty of ‘hating our brother or sister’, but when we harbour bitterness in our heart, when we gossip about them to others, when we withhold doing good on the basis of preference, when we are angry at them, when we don’t treat them with dignity and honour, ‘esteeming all better than ourselves’, we are hating them.

So heinous is the position of hate before God that John says that a person who hates is said to be walking in darkness and not the light ([1 John 2:9, 11](#)). It's entirely possible for a person to continue professing religion but remain at enmity with their Christian brother or sister. The Bible states unapologetically that such a person is a liar ([1 John 4:20](#)).

They may fool everyone else but they cannot fool God.

## **Hate Is An Issue Of The Heart**

We need to be on our guard in our Christian communities that we are not unwittingly or, worse, complicit in allowing lives to be ruled by hate, in all its insidious forms. While we may be vocal on what are perceived to be more serious sins (such as murder or immorality), we tend to overlook or excuse things like slander, gossip, envy, enmity, strife, jealousy, bitter disagreements, divisions or backbiting. Do we speak against these things and model a better way? We are all capable of such things and we are all responsible for preventing the spiritual disease that results from overlooking these things in our Christian communities.

We are warned over and over in the Bible of how hatred and bitterness can destroy us. We are encouraged to love one another, keep short records of wrongs, and forgive others, not harbouring bitterness or anger in our hearts.

We know that all these issues find their source in the darkness of the human heart.

*“For from within the hearts of people come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery.” – Mark 7:21, ESV*

*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. – Ephesians 4:31, ESV*

When we struggle with issues like gossip, slander, bitterness, anger or envy, the problem lies inside us, deep in the recesses of our heart. The issue is not with the person at whom our hate is directed but with us. And if it were not a problem that all Christians face, the many writers of the epistles, especially John, wouldn't have taken the time to warn us of it.

If we can't love our Christian brother or sister, then, quite simply, we don't [understand grace](#).

## **How Can We Change The Narrative?**

The imperative first step for anyone struggling with these issues is to spend some time considering God's grace and work of salvation in their life. Make it personal. Consider what it meant for God to give His Son for you, that you might live. Consider the weight of your guilt and inability to fully satisfy God's righteousness, and comprehend the fact that, in Jesus, you are forgiven and set free, fully reconciled and made right with God.

Perhaps you don't truly believe this to be true for yourself and this is the root cause of your fear and judgment of others. Make it a priority to [find peace and true reconciliation](#) with the God who is for you and not against you. Allow the dark places of your heart to be flooded with the light of Jesus. Ask for God to soften your heart, for Him to remove the bitterness, envy and hate. Confess to Him how ashamed you are of allowing that root of bitterness to grow and ask Him to help you prune it from your life.

And, as Christian communities, we must all love enthusiastically, hating sin but loving the sinner, remembering that we were all at one time enemies of God. We must not tolerate those things that allow hate or division to flourish but show our faith by cultivating [works of the Spirit](#), against which there is no law! (Galatians 5:22-24).

*“So don’t lose a minute in building on what you’ve been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others. With these qualities active and growing in your lives, no grass will grow under your feet, no day will pass without its reward as you mature in your experience of our Master Jesus.”*  
– 2 Peter 1:5-9, MSG

**“Anyone who claims to be intimate with God, ought to live the kind of life that Jesus lived.” | 1 John 2:6, MSG**

## **A Powerful Witness To The Truth Of Jesus Christ**

Jesus tells his disciples in John 13:35, that by loving one another as he has loved them, all the world will know that they are his disciples. *The world will see your love for each other and know, without even having to ask, that you are followers of the King.* How we love, as Christians, therefore, is either a powerful witness to the truth and reality of the risen King and our allegiance to him; or a public denial of our belief in the King and his ability to truly transform our hearts. By not loving as the King loves, we demonstrate for all to see that the *ruler of this world* still controls us; that we are allowing this rule to flourish in our lives and govern our actions towards others.

Real faith in the King is more than the words we say, the emotions we feel, ideas we debate or a truth we believe. Real faith is something we do; expressed in visible ways, deeply rooted in and flowing from this focused centre; that “one man died for everyone.” Real faith shows up in our life – particularly in the way that we love the King’s people.

‘Sometimes called “the Proverbs of the New Testament”, the

book of James practically and faithfully reminds Christians exactly how to live so as to be compelling witnesses for the name of Jesus Christ. From perseverance to true faith to controlling one's tongue, submitting to God's will, and having patience, this book aids readers in living authentically and wisely for Christ.

Many have claimed that James and the Apostle Paul differed on the question of faith versus works, but in reality, the spiritual fruit that James talks about simply demonstrates the true faith of which Paul wrote.' (taken from the introduction to James, ESV 2000). *If you claim to be a Christian*, James says, ***prove it by your actions***.

The kind of faith that is real, saving faith is shown to be vital, living and demonstrable in action. Depending on God and accepting His gift of grace – truly accepting it – will radically transform our lives. It will challenge everything we do, our belief systems and possibly even misplaced prejudices about others. It will compel us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. It will compel us to do better and be better, not so that we 'earn God's favour' but so that our faith can be seen as a reality, not just a matter of empty words.

Awareness of, and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our Christian lives. We are who we are, first and foremost, because of God revealed in Christ. Yet if our 'loving union with God' doesn't result in a living faith, shown by our good works to others, then, as [1 John 4:7-21](#) says so eloquently, our love for God **simply isn't real**. This kind of faith is a counterfeit Christianity and nothing more than a corpse.

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# Traditions: Good Or Bad?

One of my favourite movies is *Ever After* with Drew Barrymore and Anjelica Huston. It has all the right ingredients for a great story – humour, romance, drama and a feel-good ending. When I think of this movie, I have a few favourite scenes that top my list, but the one where Danielle’s father leaves to go abroad and stops at the gate to wave often plays through my mind. Perhaps because it’s such a bittersweet moment. As the audience, we know what’s coming but Danielle doesn’t. Perhaps because it speaks so clearly of the love of a parent for their child and the pain that separation from each other brings. And perhaps, also, for the line that Danielle quotes as she waits for what she expects her father will do:

*“Wait! It’s tradition. He always waves at the gate.”*

## What Are Traditions?

Our lives are full of traditions; from cultural and religious traditions to social and family traditions.

*‘Traditions’ are described as inherited, established, or customary patterns of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or a social custom) or a belief or story or a body of beliefs or stories relating to the past that are commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable.” They can also be “the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction”, “cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions”, or*

*“characteristic manner, method, or style”. – Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

The word “tradition” derives from the [Latin](#) *tradere* literally meaning *to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping*. Traditions are, then, often important customs, stories or information, passed down from generation to generation as a means of safekeeping those beliefs or customs. They may have been originally passed through oral communication including methods such as storytelling and poetry, rhyme and alliteration.

Sometimes the meaning behind a tradition becomes lost but the tradition or custom remains. Sometimes a greater meaning becomes attached to a tradition than was originally intended or implied. The following is an lighthearted story highlighting how traditions or customs sometimes come about:

*A woman was preparing the evening’s roast dinner and divided the large piece of meat into two smaller, equal portions, placing them in separate trays in the oven. When her husband asked her why she did it that way, she replied that she actually didn’t know – it was just the way her mother had always done it. That got her thinking and later that evening, she phoned her mother to find out the reason behind the two trays of meat. Her own mother didn’t know either, it was just what **her** mother had always done. They decided to phone the woman’s grandmother and, when asked what was so important about dividing the meat, she laughed and replied. “oh, nothing. I just never had an oven large enough to fit my entire portion of meat on one rack. Dividing it in two simply meant I could fit it all in my oven at the same time.”*

In this situation, practical requirements had, by the third generation, become something of a tradition within the family without any actual particular significance behind the tradition.

Even amongst the animal kingdom, traditions can be observed. Behavioral traditions are seen in groups of fish, birds, and mammals, such as orangutans and chimpanzees. In fact, chimpanzees will actually transfer traditional behavior from one group to another (not just within a group).

Human beings are hyper-social animals, albeit a lot smarter (most of the time!) than the animal world but even we come together through shared practices, traditions and rituals. These traditions form a social glue that binds groups within our society and often provides benefits such as increasing family bonds and forming a strong group identity. Traditions often offer a sense of belonging for individuals.

## **Traditions: Good Or Bad?**

Traditions can sometimes be viewed in a negative light. They are also frequently used in political or religious discussions to establish the legitimacy of a particular set of values. However, it's important to remember that traditions, in themselves, are neither good or bad. Just because something is replicated or repeated, doesn't mean it **isn't** of value or importance. Conversely, just because something is replicated or repeated doesn't mean that it **is** important or valuable.

Traditions matter when they relate to important human values, such as faith, freedom, integrity, education, personal responsibility, a strong work ethic or selflessness. They provide context for thoughtful reflection and a deeper appreciation of the things that matter in life. Traditions are a language unto themselves; with a meaning that conveys something deeper.

## **What Does The Bible Say About Traditions?**

[Religion](#) is a place when traditions abound and they often form a rich tapestry in the life of a religious person. They are often drawn from history and have meaning and symbolism behind

them. In the Old Testament, traditions and symbols actually pointed forward to a greater truth regarding Jesus, [his work as Saviour](#) and God's [relationship with humanity](#).

Jesus himself instituted the tradition commonly known as The Last Supper, a fellowship meal where his followers would eat bread and drink wine 'in remembrance of him' (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 13). This tradition is still observed today, some 2000 years later.

Many cultures have traditions at the heart of their spiritual and religious worship and Christianity is no different. The Bible never condemns traditions of themselves but Jesus' words in Mark 7:6-8 tell us clearly that traditions shouldn't ever supercede God's will.

*"He (Jesus) replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." (Mark 7:6-8), NIV*

Christ's words indicate that He was not condemning human tradition, but *those who place human traditions, laws, or demands before God's will* expressed in the commandments.

The letter of Paul to the believers in Colosse confirms Jesus' words:

*"See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ."  
– Colossians 2:8, ESV*

The Old Testament dealt with this problem too, where rituals had replaced righteousness and justice:

*“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” – Amos 5:21-25, ESV*

Traditions or rituals shouldn't come before our relationship with God and customs should never supercede God's commandments. When a tradition forms a valuable and significant part of our worship, spiritual life and our human experience, then it's good that it's observed. But when traditions are human traditions, unrelated to our relationship with God, then their significance and priority is not always important and their observance is neither required nor expected by God in our spiritual life.

There are certain traditions, though, relating to faith and morals that Christians are commanded to keep and obey:

*“I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold fast to the traditions, just as I handed them on to you.” – 1 Corinthians 11:2, CSB*

*“So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.” – 2 Thessalonians 2:15, ESV*

We can therefore view traditions as beautiful and meaningful additions to our human life, perpetuating things that matter and ideas that are worth conveying through the generations. But these traditions should never be confused as being superior to the traditions that God is actually looking for in the life of a Christian person; the traditions of “love, joy,

peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

*“There is a real beauty to be found in tradition – a beauty that may not propel us forward in the sense of quantifiable “progress” or change, but that does propel us forward as human beings in life wisdom, understanding and even emotional intellect. Indeed, aside from the more obvious – albeit equally important – function of tradition as a way to pass on the values, morals, customs and culture of one generation to the next, tradition also teaches us something about life, where we came from and who we are as people.” – [Huffington Post](#)*