

Family!

Overview

We're celebrating Christmas soon. I also have two children who are born in December. And there's an added layer of complexity and goodness and celebration and difficulty and all the things. I'm not complaining, I promise, I'm not complaining. But December's busy. And I got to thinking of what our world outside and then the church within, what we think about as we go from November to December.

And it's a time where naturally we think about getting together. We think about, and so many people in our community, in our church here, it's the time where you're trying to get together with people, with family, because it's hard. But the reality is there is this notion that we're getting together and it's gonna be good.

And there's this idea of beautiful, and it is. Because for us, we know it's the birth of Jesus. But it's also this spectacular holiday, full of lights and gifts and beautiful things that are also good, right? But then this reality of actual human existence in our everyday life, I want to invite you guys, track with me, when you think of family, when you think of this idea of family, what comes to mind? So culturally in mine, I've shared this a bit before, when I grew up as a Chinese-Canadian family, I was born in Toronto, but I grew up with my grandparents in the house, and at one point, my cousins in the house, and my aunt and uncle in the house, there was like 20 people in my house.

That's normal for us, but probably not normal in other contexts. But this idea of family was great, and in reality, though, there was goodness, but there was a lot of difficulty among the generations. And I think that there's this chasm sometimes as we live life.

The goodness is that we're reminded there's a marker, like December. Whether or not this is actually the date that Jesus was born is up for debate, and that's not what we're talking about today. But it's the fact that we need as people reasons to remember the things that we need to remember that helps us get back to a rhythm of remembering what is true and what is good.

But the reality is, even though the markers and the seasons help us go through the motions of gathering, the reality is that life is not always pretty. Christmas and the holidays are not always filled with the beautiful lights and the trees and the gifts for everybody. So when I ask you guys about family, think about all the things you're looking forward to, but also think about the realities.

Maybe this year is difficult, or maybe you know people in your life, and this is a hard time. I know for a fact, and I don't know about you, but I'm gonna say, just human nature, that family, whether it's your extended family, your nuclear family, or the people you've chosen to make your family, it's not always been an easy road. I think for me, I can say for sure, thank God for his goodness, but man, there's been layers and layers of mess within my own family, and some of which are still there.

Because why? People are involved, people are great, right? Sometimes, I was talking to Linda this morning, we're both going, sometimes we pray, how do you put up with us, God? How do you put up with us and how we are? And I say this because we are walking into the next month, there's gonna be lots of good, and wonderful, and celebratory things, but in the midst of this greater arching family that we have, and we're in, there's actually another layer on top, which is this kingdom family that we're invited to, that we often say, and we say, hey, we're part of a family, we're a community, but I think it's especially important for us to really hone in on what that is, because the cool part is that we're actually related, in the name of Jesus, is that because of his blood, and because of what he's done, people who are outside of the family are also actually invited. Whether they respond is the question, but those of us who say Jesus is Lord, and we've accepted him into our hearts, we are now part of a greater kingdom family. It's hard to remember that, because when we think of family, we think of our children, grandchildren, extended family, because we're blood related, but there's something about this reality that I think God wants us to be perpetually reminded of, because that changes everything, and at least it should.

The kingdom family is that you and I are brothers and sisters in Christ, that you and I are connected because of one, and that is Jesus, and that because we're family, we get to be in this big, beautiful mess of trying to live as adopted siblings, and sometimes I think the chasm between the idea of family and the reality happens in the church even more than it does in our regular idea of family and nuclear families. I remember before I was a Christian, and one of the reasons why I was hesitant to explore faith is because I knew of so many people who were professing Christians, specifically Christians, who would say a lot of things about acting good and being good, but I knew their behavior behind it, and my criticism at that time as a non-believer was, well, why would I wanna be part of something that just is hypocritical? And while I think that that's a valid observation, the reality was this, I was in darkness. I wasn't part of God's family.

All I got to was to observe what I could see in the dark, and what you can see in the dark is very little. Does that make sense? It's not an accurate depiction. And yet, a couple weeks ago, I was on the plane, and I was praying to God right before going, God, it's been a while since I've traveled alone.

If there's anyone, and of course, the man sitting next to me, he had his earphones on, and he turned, and he said, hey, are you going home, or are you, and that began three hours of conversation, and half of it by his bringing up of topic was about faith. And it turned out that his in-laws are pastors, and it turned out that for 40, 50 years, he's been on this journey of who this higher power is, but his conclusion to that day in the plane was, I believe there's something out there, but I can't name him or it, because when I was eight, my uncle died, and I couldn't, I was angry, and I don't understand how a world that's supposed to have a good God has such terrible things, and that it keeps happening and happening, and the people that I know who are in the church, they're often telling me what I should or should not do, so I don't know, and here's another example of someone who has valid observations, who's been invited into this family, but is unsure whether they should say yes or no, and who and what they're saying yes and no to, and I say all this as a preface, as people who are in reality living in the church as brothers and sisters, and how that gap of, hey, we are now related, that's so great, we're a family, but the reality is, families don't look pretty most of the time, can you agree, friends? From disagreements to disappointments to tragedy to hardship, all the things happen in families, and it's a sobering reality because then, we realize that whether we're inside the family or outside the family, we're actually just people. What is the difference? Well, we know the difference, but so does all the people who wrote in here, and today we're gonna look at the book of 1 John, because the apostle John is very particular in saying, hey, you guys know, we know who we are, but why, what marks us, what is the difference, and let's not make excuses for ourselves, let's not pretend like things aren't what they are, so we're gonna look into 1 John 3, and he's very particular and intentional about talking about this family reality, because he actually addresses us and addresses the people and his brothers and sisters that he's talking to in 1 John as children of God, so that's a marker of our reality.

As the church, we are the bride of Christ, but because we've been adopted into the kingdom family of God, you and I are God's children, making you and I brothers and sisters in Christ, making Jesus our Lord and Savior, our King, but also our brother, but also the friend who is the Holy Spirit that's within us. It's a beautiful family, it's a beautiful reality, but then John, in 1 John 3, is saying, hey, we are a family and you are children, okay? This is the reality, but he says this in 1 John 3, and we're gonna start in verse seven and go to verse 10. I'm gonna read from the NIV, but up there is the KJV that's up for reference.

He says, dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. It's getting heavy, guys, I'm just letting you know, but hopefully we'll draw out, because this is good news for us. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the very beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. Amen, amen.

No one who is born of God will continue to sin because God's seed remains in them. They cannot go on sinning because they have been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are.

Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister. Okay, let's sit for a moment. That is not light, is it? Okay. I've sat with this for a while, particularly this week. I don't wanna clear up offhand though. What John is not saying is that there's two types of people.

Like there's not like a good version of all people and then an evil version of all people. That's not what he means, even though it could be interpreted like, okay, you're either a child of the devil or a child of God, which that he is saying, but it doesn't mean practically that people are solely evil and solely good, okay? That's not what he's saying. But what he is saying is in the realm of the family, if we look at the world through the lens of family, that means we have a father, we have a parent.

There's only two choices. We are either children of God or we're not. And the alternative is the father of lies. And he's very clear about that. And why it's important right now for us to remember, I think we know this, but the reason why it's important, it's because we live in an ever divided world. And I want us to see the reality that we live in. It's always been difficult. The warfare has always been real. Satan is here to seek and kill and destroy.

That's his mission, right? And he's trying. He's already lost, but he keeps trying until the day Jesus comes. But sometimes as we live as the family of God, we don't always, we're not always cognizant and aware of what it actually means. And John is saying, hey, listen, it's not about perfection. It's not about, oh, you're saved now. Your life is perfect and good. You'll act and behave perfectly and good. No, he's saying, when you have been saved, Jesus is actually giving you the one thing you need, which is freedom. Freedom from what? The bondage of sin, the bondage of being in the dark.

So if you picture being in a family and your family reality is darkness, and then all of a sudden you say yes to Jesus and then light shows up and you see everything differently, right? You actually see things as they are. But the reality is that you're still in the same world, still with sin in existence, still with a bunch of people who are broken, just that you are now aware that there's a God and you're now aware of who your father is. And so John's saying, don't let anyone and don't let yourself convince yourself otherwise that as the children of God, we can just say, okay, we are saved and we're good, but we're not gonna love our brothers and sisters.

And here's the thing. I wrestle with this a lot because I don't think any of us are gonna sit there and stand or sit or walk around and think, okay, I'm gonna be intentionally unloving to my brothers and sisters. That's not what we're consciously doing. He's saying that the freedom that we actually have means we are free from habitual sin, which means because we're aware now, we're not going to intentionally try to hurt each other on purpose. And sometimes we still end up because we are sinful in nature, but yet we have a way we can be formed like Jesus. We are now just not walking around in darkness and circles and going, well, I'm just gonna do whatever I want. I'm gonna do whatever I want. But he's saying that anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brothers and sisters. There's two markers here.

He's saying, if Jesus has come into your heart, the natural response over time, it starts from that day. It's not perfection as the result immediately. It's saying that begins our journey and the time of us realizing, oh, I don't have to be this way. My life doesn't have to stay this way. But yet he says there is a heart shift along with doing right. Because the reality is if we're just about doing right and being righteous, which is also God's heart, but his righteousness is motivated by God's love.

And one without the other is actually partial because Jesus is the perfection of righteousness and love. And if we are just people who do good, think about all the different religions in this world that do good. Think of all the ways in which and the organizations in this world that do good. It's not about just doing good. Because here's the thing. If we stand for justice, which we should, but our hearts are hardened by the evil and what we see is not the enemy, we are seeing each other as the enemy.

Does that make sense? So he's saying, not only do you need to know who your father is, but we need to know who the actual enemy is. Because Satan's been the one from the beginning of time sinning and deceiving and perpetually tempting and all of us who are here, wherever we might be in which family, we are responding. And he's saying, even though Satan uses and uses people to do his work, the real enemy is actually him.

And those of us who are in the family of God, our role is not to be perfect, but as we follow Christ, ask ourselves, are we becoming more like him? Because our parenthood, who we follow, is not just determining our destination, right? It's also determining who we're becoming along the way. And that's an important duality to live in. And so he says this, and so this is what he prefaces with and says, don't be deceived.

Don't let anyone convince you otherwise. Why? Because he says in the next few verses from 11 to 13 or 14, he says, for this is the message you have heard from the beginning. We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brothers were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer. And you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. Not light, again, but it's a continuation of this truth. When Jesus came, he increased the marker of what morality and ethical living to a degree that is unmatched because it's no longer about the bare minimum. Just don't kill each other. Just don't hurt. He's saying, you just have to hate in your heart.

And that's not a small feat. If that is what's harboring in your heart, that's equivalent in the family of God as murder. And when John says, let's not lead each other and let's not be led astray.

Because I find for myself, it's so easy as a believer to say, okay, I'm behaving well, I'm doing the right things. But internally, where only the Lord can see, if we're harboring hate in our hearts, and here's the thing, hate doesn't just show up.

Because we live in an imperfect world, in the family of God and outside, we experience pain, we experience suffering, and we're caused, there's church hurt, it's a thing. Church hurt is when people in the church hurt each other and then sometimes people leave the church because of church hurt. And the reality is because we're hurt, we draw conclusions. Hurt and pain can turn into anger, can lead to contempt and bitterness, and could eventually turn into hate.

That's the pathway in which it goes. But a lot of the times we don't confront this in us and we're not aware because we know we are to love. And John says this after, he's like, this is not a new thing. We know we're called to love each other, but yet there's actually a caveat there. Knowing that we should love and behaving like we should love is one thing. But internally, if there is any unforgiveness, if there's anything that's leading us to a place of hate, which is actually a lack of love, that leads us to the exact opposite.

And I'm saying this, church, because in the overarching reality that I mentioned in the beginning, if we jump back in the bigger picture, we live in a divided world, and I say this because, it's not because it was never undivided. It's the fact that there's so much technology and so much more awareness and so much opinion that never before in the history of time have people been able to access and just even give each other opinion. And it's causing a divide that we've never seen before in humanity.

And just as there's difficulty, there's also opportunity for the church. Because how are we the family of God if within us, we are not united in the spirit? The greater call to the unity that can only happen in the spirit is that we're aware of the deception that even we are prone to sometimes. Our father is God, but Satan is perpetually the enemy.

And if we can look and actually listen to what the apostle John is saying, he's saying, recognize who your enemy actually is. Identify what he's actually doing in this world. So that when we're in relationship with each other, especially with your brothers and sisters, let's not pretend and glaze over and say, we're fine. If there is anything, there's biblical responses as to how we can work things out. But our job, the only thing that we can actually control between us and the Lord is to acknowledge our hearts. Because it's not if, it's when we are hurt, when there's issues in the church.

For us to be able to not let the hurt turn into anger, because what does he say? He never says, you'll never be angry. The Lord has gotten angry because he hates what? He hates sin. So he doesn't say, don't hate. He says, hate sin, but not each other. There's a difference. But in a convoluted world and in our brokenness, somehow it gets meshed together.

That we cannot separate who the father is, who the, like which father we're following, or who, like the world in the darkness, who they're following, and to separate the behaviors and the influence from the actual people that actually all need Jesus too. The unity of the church is a marker of his goodness and the good news. It is. Because if we're not free and freely living in this place with each other, maybe, just maybe, that's why it's hard for someone like that guy on the plane sitting next to me to say, what's so good about this Jesus?

Friends, I hope you're not here feeling condemnation because that is absolutely not what I'm doing or what I sense the Lord wanting for us. It's sobering reality of what John is indicating because he's saying, let's not paint a broad brush over ourselves and each other. Because if we're saying that the righteousness of Jesus is in us and his spirit is in us to empower us, let us walk with him in step.

And let's confront the things that are inside and not leave any open doors for the enemy to come in, to divide the body because that's what happens. Opinions and differences, and even when there's rightful things that are wrong, he says, this is what really at the end we're called to do. Verse 16, this is how we know what love is.

Jesus laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need, but has no pity on them, how can we, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with our words or speech, but with actions and truth. Righteousness and love have to go together.

They're both sides of the same cloth. It's not just love. First of all, if we're in this world, the definition of love is convoluted in itself. But Jesus was the perfect example of love and righteousness. He could not be unrighteous and God is not unrighteous in any way. But because he loves doing right and seeing and actually having the posture of love, looking at a broken people, having compassion on them, desiring them, loving them so much that he laid down his own life.

We know this, this is the good news of Jesus is that we didn't have to do anything. We didn't, we couldn't have. And yet he gave himself so that we would be clothed in his righteousness so that when God looks at us, he doesn't see sin, he sees Jesus. And he's like, I love you. Now you are, your eyes are opened. Follow me, be obedient to me. Why? Because as you obey, as we obey, no matter how old, how long we've walked with him, our call is in obedience to him. And as we obey and we walk and we say, okay, your command for me is to follow you. What does following you look like? Oh, to forgive as I have been forgiven.

And that's what John is saying here. He's saying, if we have any unforgiveness, that's where hate comes from. Let us not let each other off the hook as the church and say, it's okay, just cut that guy off. It's okay, he did wrong or she did wrong. Push him aside. He's saying how we hold our hearts and whether we're becoming more like Jesus in the way we pray and even pray for our enemies and pray for those who have hurt us matters just as much as us doing what is right.

So if we see people outside of the church and there's evil happening and there's things that are unjust, that is absolutely, we should stand up and we should be fighting for what is good in Jesus name. But remember who the actual enemy is because the people who are living in darkness need hope and we are their hope embodied. They need us to pray for them, not for us to judge them because we're not their judge. So let's not deceive ourselves. Let's take our rightful place and exalt the one who is in his rightful place. And follow him and desire to pursue the righteousness that only comes from him and desire to do the things that he asks us to do.

And I say forgiveness because that's the key piece here. As John said, let us not love with our words and speech but with actions and in truth. It's not just let's do good but if there is a chance that bitterness can turn into hate and resentment and contempt in our hearts for the way we see our fellow brothers and sisters in the church, the only solution, the only solution is for us to first and foremost come before the Lord and repent but seek forgiveness.

What does the Lord's prayer say? Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. So make this place be like you. And then what do we say? Forgive us in our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. We forget that caveat, don't we sometimes? Because being wronged and being hurt and going through tough situations hurts so badly. And we might even be right in terms of knowing that we did nothing to receive this. We did nothing to be given that harm, to be neglected, to be rejected, to be hurt.

But yet forgiveness in our journey of sanctification and being more like Jesus, there's a caveat. He says, unless you forgive, you can't walk around, we can't walk around like we're just overall blanket statement forgiven, church. We have been forgiven through the work of Jesus but that does not permit us to continue in the ways of sin, amen? But we're actually called to something greater. The good news that the world needs so desperately is the same good news that we need as his believers. Let us not forget that is what John is saying. He's saying, there's no fast external behavior solution for us to just act like we love each other better.

We must actually be it. And the only way is to clear our hearts and be righteous before the Lord and to be courageous and humble to say, Lord, if there's any offensive way in me, please lead me into the anyway everlasting so that we are pursuing righteousness by first confessing, repenting, seeking forgiveness so that we have capacity to forgive because the freedom is in what? It's the fact that we have been forgiven. That is the victory that we stand on friends.

We have been forgiven. And sometimes the subtle deception of the enemy is to convince us that we don't have that freedom. The bondage is not even real. The fact is we are redeemed. We are in the family of God. He is our God. And the inability internally to forgive is the subtle subtlety of the enemy trying to convince you to stay in your pain, to stay in our brokenness, to stay in our hurt. And I'm not saying it's easy, but the God who saved us is capable of healing us, amen. He forgave us and he gave us the example because when Jesus hung on that cross, it wasn't because he died for certain people who loved him first.

He died for all, for the very people who put him there, for the sins of the past, present and the future, for all the things that we have done and will do that are disobedient, that are far from him. He died for the people that we think are too far gone. He died for the people that we don't even wanna look at because we place judgment on them.

And yet, and yet, here he is pulling us all in. There he did on the cross what no one could ever do. And he's inviting us to step into a deeper place of his love and embodies righteousness. And so we think, okay, we have to love other people. Of course we do. But actually the connection between who we are as the family of God has everything to do with how we are a light in the world.

And it's not, we have to get our house in order completely perfect before we can serve. It's let's pay attention to ourselves and our love for each other, to not allow the things of evil to open doors for the enemy to come in. In fact, pray boundaries over yourself.

In fact, go in, pray alongside each other, confess to one another so that we may be people who are perpetually forgiven so that we may forgive. Because that is how the church as a whole cross denominations, cross boundaries, cross sizes, locations are actually going to be the church. Because when you think about it, there's all the reasons in this whole world to disagree about anything.

And beyond us coming physically together once a week or times during the week in the name of Jesus, what is it that actually holds us together? It's the fact that we are family. And as family, we're called to work it out, to love each other, to pray for each other, to forgive in this house so that the glory of God will be revealed beyond us. And so church, as we enter into this time of celebration and family, I hope that this is, this has been a heavy word even for me.

I struggled with how to share. And I prayed that the spirit of God would move in our hearts to convict us because that's the only thing that should and can happen is that we will look within and be more aware of how we are as the body of Christ, to respond to the invitation, what God's doing all across the world in different ways, where the spirit is moving in ways that maybe you guys have seen. Some of you have lived longer than me. Maybe you've seen God move in magnificent ways that I haven't. This is a first for me in the last 20 years. But God is doing something, church.

And I think it's the word to be, it's a timely word because there's an urgency right now in our time where as close as we draw to God is as real as it becomes because He actually, He's never needed people to do His work, but He's invited us to come along. And I really want us, it's like a desire, and I know it's God. I think He wants us to pay attention to the things that are happening.

And I had stories upon stories from different people from different churches in Ontario, across Canada, in the world, where people are just showing up into churches because they saw Jesus. And we're talking about people who have no faith background. We're talking about people who practice witchcraft. There's another one I heard a couple weeks ago where in her meditation with a crystal ball, Jesus revealed Himself. And she said, okay, I'll follow you. And she Googled and found the closest church, which was a friend's church of mine, and she walked.

Praise God. He is doing something. And why I'm saying this, how this relates is like, church, let's be aware of who the actual enemy is. We always knew that. But let's, the work of discernment is, and I think I've said this before, it's not just discerning between what is right and wrong, but it's discerning between, through the wisdom of God, what is right and what is almost right. Because the enemy is lurking and constantly trying to slow us down, but yet he's actually powerless.

But now, in the midst of what the Lord is doing and how His Spirit's moving, He's calling His church to come together. And this is just one element. Today, I'm not giving you, this is the solution to all things.

I'm just responding to something that the Lord is convicting me with, and I'm hoping that you're moved as well through the Spirit is that, in order for the church to be united, we got to be aware of the things that keep us apart, and not the fake things, not the fake boundaries that are external, not buildings, not locations, not like little disagreements of how, you know, worship should be or should not be. We're talking about internal, deep motivations. Let there be no hate amongst the body of Christ.

Amen. Let us be humble and obedient to God so that He actually is giving access to our hearts to transform us into His image more and more, so that as His children, we are walking towards our Father and that we are part of His kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

So I'm gonna ask the worship team to come up and to, we're gonna respond with a song. But I'm gonna invite all of us, if we could just take a moment with the Lord. I don't know your story. I don't know if there's places where there's hardship in relationships, where there's been a lot of hurt or difficulty, or maybe you know of someone, or maybe you're in the receiving end of someone cutting you off or just a very strained relationship. Gonna invite you to bring everything to God in this time. Ask the Spirit to just soften our hearts because there's no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

This is an invitation for us to come before the throne of grace. As people who are free, may we choose to come before the Lord and repent of the places where we need to. Where there is unforgiveness, God, lead us to a place where we lay that down at your cross. Remind us of the forgiveness you have given us. Lead us to forgive each other. And as we make that choice, help us each day to see our brothers and sisters as you see them. And then help us see the dark world as you see them in need of your love and grace and your mercy, Jesus. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the power and the glory forever and ever. And the church says, amen. Would you stand? And can we sing these words to seek God to purify us, to seek God to refine us as we live as his forgiven children.