

## “Authority Issues—Love Letter”

Today we’re wrapping up this series of messages called Authority Issues. And I’ve got to say it’s been a challenging trip. It’s been a journey of getting under God’s authority and getting under the authority structures and authority figures that God has put in our lives. And we’ve been trying to identify and get to the bottom of our authority issues.

We’ve talked about how God always works through authority and why sometimes we rebel. We’ve talked about how God set up authorities in our lives not because he’s on some power trip, but because God loves us, wants to protect us, wants the best for us. We’ve talked about what happens when we step out from under God’s authority. It’s like stepping out from the protection of an umbrella in a hail storm. We get hammered by hail, pelted by problems, drenched with dysfunction. But God has given us the choice. We choose.

Last week Mark talked about over and under. The times when we’re in authority over somebody, and at the same time under other authorities. I read his message, and it was really good. By the way, don’t forget that all our messages are on the website (spwired.com). He touched on some really important things.

So God is a God of authority. He wants us to get under the stuff that he’s put over us so that we can get over the stuff that he’s put under us. It’s about God’s love, it’s about his desire for you and me to live out the best possible version of our lives.

We’ve used an umbrella to illustrate the authority of God. Today I want to look specifically at the word of God. The Bible. The B-I-B-L-E. That’s our authority. This umbrella represents the Bible. I should live my life, you should live your life, under the umbrella. We’re under the authority of God’s word.

But since we have authority issues, we have issues with the Bible. So we do some things to it. **Sometimes we distort the Bible.** We take a verse out of context or a paragraph out of context. We especially do this when we want permission to do something we know is wrong. We do this when we want permission to avoid doing something. I’ve heard this one a number of times. “Jesus said we would always have the poor with us, so that means we don’t have to do anything about them, right?” Wrong, that’s distorting God’s word.

**Others dissect the Bible.** They treat the Bible like a biology specimen. Pick it apart, pull it apart, scrutinize it, but never really see it’s life; never really apply it.

But the biggest thing that I struggle with, and the biggest thing that you struggle with, is not distorting, it’s not dissecting the Bible. **It’s disregarding the Bible.**

[Aaron begins to tear out pages of the Bible to illustrate how some people treat Scripture.] We take the Bible and we thumb through it. “The Bible says, ‘Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.’” I don’t like that. The Bible says, ‘Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you’ Oh, I really don’t like that. The Bible says, ‘If you look at a woman with lust you’ve committed adultery?’ I don’t like that. The Bible says, ‘Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse (into the local church)?’ You’re joking, right? The Bible says, ‘You shall not covet?’ I don’t like that either.” The Bible tells us, *avoid gossip*. Let’s get rid of that right now!

Some of you are thinking, “I can’t believe Aaron has ripped apart the Bible.” Well, how do you think God feels when we rip apart his word? We all have our own versions of the Bible, don’t we? When we have our own versions, our lives end up being perversions. So what I want to challenge you to do is to pick up the pieces, to pick up the pages of Scripture.

Let’s take some time as we wrap up this series to pick up the pieces, put them back into our Bibles, and understand and process what it means to live under the authority of God’s word.

**A little bit of an aside here. Sometimes we use prayer as a form of rebellion. We hide behind prayer. We pray for clarity when God has already spoken. So don’t give God that smoke and mirrors stuff. Don’t pray stupid prayers. You’re wasting God’s time and your time as well.**

**Well, what’s a stupid prayer? A stupid prayer would be something like this. Let’s say a family would pray this prayer. “Lord, bless our family.” Well, how in the world is God going to bless your family when you’re not under his authority? How in the world is God going to bless your family when you’re not involved in a local**

church? When you're not serving in the context of the biblically functioning community? When you're not bringing the whole tithe into the storehouse? When you're not forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you?

How in the world is God going to bless you? Positionally, you're in the rain. You're drenched in dysfunction. You're being pelted by problems. You're being hammered by hail. We've got to get under what God is over and then he'll put us over the stuff that needs to be under us.

We pray some stupid prayers like, "God, bless me in this relationship." And maybe you're a single adult or a student and you're hooked up with someone who's not a believer. You're having sex outside marriage. God's saying, "I want to bless your relationships, but the blessed place is over here. Come over here, under my authority."

God's already told us where the blessed place is. Let's get under it.

The Bible is what it is. So, what is it? It's a letter. Let me let Jeremiah 31:3 unpack that thought. God is speaking here in Jeremiah. He says, "**I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving kindness**" (Jeremiah 31:13, NIV). There are messages like that over and over in the Bible. What does that sound like. It's a letter. Specifically, it's a love letter. Isn't that amazing?

Check this out: I keep a file of the love letters that Janet has sent me over the years. I went through them this week. I liked this one from when Janet and I were dating. She lived in Lee's Summit and I lived in Chillicothe and we would go out on Friday nights or Saturdays. She writes, "Aaron...I've been thinking about you a lot—especially in the last few weeks. I find myself hoping that the week days will go by faster so the weekend will roll around and we can be together. Last Saturday I couldn't wait to see you. I had the same feeling I've gotten when I just couldn't wait to go on some trips or when I was little and was so excited about Christmas."

Yeah baby! I think it even had some perfume on it at one time. Some *Charlie*. I took this love letter that Janet wrote to me and I read it over and over again. I read it over and over again because she wrote it and she was crazy about me and she **is** crazy about me. She loves me. It just fired me up to know that a girl loved me like she loved me.

What is the Bible? The Bible is a bunch of love letters. The Bible is not sprayed with *Charlie* perfume, but it's sprayed with the cologne of Christ. The Bible is all about love. This whole thing about God's authority and the authority of scripture is about God's love, his desire for us to live out the best possible version of our lives. We'll never reach, though, our ultimate position until we live a life of submission; submission to the word of God.

God's love is tender. But notice, too, God's love is also tough. Here is where I mess up. Here is what I have thought before and maybe you're the same. I've said this, "Aaron, man, when you obey Scripture, that's tough. I mean that's hard." And some of you right now are thinking that. But it's not tough when you obey. It's tender when you obey. When you disobey, it's tough. When you walk outside the authority of God, that is when it's tough, that's when you'll get hammered by hail, pelted by problems, and drenched in dysfunction. That's the tough stuff.

So God loves us enough to tell us the truth about our condition. And a lot of people have a vested interest in keeping the Bible at bay, because these people know that once they open Scripture, it opens their lives. Once they study the Bible, it studies them. Once they mark the Bible, it marks them.

We might try to keep the Bible at bay, but it's meant to be, listen, eaten. In the old western *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, Josey becomes friends with an old Native American, he owns two things, his rifle and piece of red rock candy. He holds up that big piece of candy that he's had for who knows how long and says, "It's candy, but it's not for eatin', it's just for lookin' at." Candy's not meant for lookin' at. It's meant for eatin'!

We're to eat the Word. We're to feed on the Word. Jeremiah 15:16. He said, "**When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O Lord God Almighty**" (Jeremiah 15:16, NIV). One thing I love about Saint Paul's is that we are a diet and exercise kind of church. We're about feasting on the word of God and then using that nutrition to do something.

Think about it. Why do you eat? Why do I eat? It gives me the calories and the energy to do the stuff. That's what we want to be as a church. And we're getting there. We can always do better; we have a lot of room for improvement in the diet and in the exercise, but we're getting there!

Let's spend some time on this. Let's spend some time with specifics from scripture. Specific ways we put ourselves under the authority of God through his word and as we feast on that word, we then exercise it. **When we put ourselves under the authority of God's word we develop hearts of compassion.**

One day Fulton Sheen, the famous Catholic bishop, was visiting a leper colony in Africa. He said that as he knelt down to talk to a man whose wounds were very extensive, the chain that he was wearing around his neck broke and the cross on the end of the chain fell into an open, festering wound on the man's leg. Sheen said, "You know, for a minute I was just repulsed. I wanted to just kind of step back. And then all of a sudden I was filled...I was overcome with love for this person. I reached into the sore and I took up the cross." God's word, his authority, has said, "The best version of your life is lived with a heart of compassion." We reach into the wounds of this world, ministering as Jesus would.

Compassion is a state of the heart. I was talking to my friend Nick Capra last week and he told me how God's growing this kind of heart in him. Around Christmastime he was delivering food baskets and gifts to the needy through Salvation Army. As he was traveling around he ran into an acquaintance of his who asked him what he was doing. Nick told him and this person's response was something like, "Why would you want to do that for those freeloaders." Nick said that broke his heart. He'd been in the homes of these people, and seen what the struggle with, and heard some of their stories.

Here's the dangerous thing, when we label people like that, we insulate ourselves. That person labeled people in need as freeloaders which meant that he didn't have to do anything to help them, "They're all freeloaders." Labels like that are excuses that keep us from living out our faith. You see, it's harder to label somebody like that when you've been by their side, and heard their story, and looked into their eyes. We put ourselves under the authority of God and we model the compassion of Jesus Christ.

**When we put ourselves under the authority of God's word we also are given the challenge of servanthood.** Jesus modeled this over and over when he washed the dirty feet of his disciples, when he stopped to heal the leper, to comfort the grieving. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "**All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work**" (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NRSV). This is simply telling us that God's word prepares us for God's works. Remember, we are striving to be a church of diet and exercise. We feast on God's word, but we balance that with action. If all we do is feast, we get fat! If all we do is action, we starve. So this is about growing a servant's heart, and this is about the ordinary stuff. But it almost always means getting dirty.

Our confirmands did a service project at Watered Gardens a couple weeks ago and one of the mentors, Todd Stout, was telling me how he and his confirmand, Austin Barnett, volunteered to clean the men's bathroom. It was kinds of gross, but they got in there and scrubbed it down. It was a humbling, but important job, and they did. And the thing is, that servant heart is contagious.

And that act of servanthood was in my mind Monday night. Monday night I had a meeting here at the church, as I was locking up and heading home I passed by one the restrooms and opened the door to turn the lights off and realized very quickly that something was wrong. Somebody had had an accident on himself and on the floor, and left a mess and some messy clothing behind. I confess that as I surveyed the mess and the smell I let out some expletives—but they really were descriptive words! I also admit that I looked at the mess and wondered if it could wait until the custodians got here in the morning. But I knew it couldn't wait until morning. And I thought about Austin and Todd. I got the custodial cart and put on my rubber gloves and got to work. No matter where we find ourselves in the routines of our lives, we put ourselves under the authority of God's word and we choose to serve, even when it's an interruption, **especially** when it's an interruption.

When we live under the authority of God's word we respond as people under authority. It's not about serving when it's convenient. It's not about serving when we have free time. It's not about serving when we feel like it. It's about having the heart of a servant. It's about keeping the images of God's word in the forefront of our minds so when the opportunities arise, we simply reach in.

God's word speaks his authority into our lives. **When we put ourselves under the authority of God's word we also are given direction about our money.** Look at the state of our economy right now. I'm not economist, but what started this? Greed. People wanting bigger houses than they could afford, lenders doing

all kinds of crazy things to get rich quick. And now there are companies and families going bankrupt, losing their homes. It's crazy. If people put themselves under God's authority when it comes to money, the entire nation, and global economy would be better off! But no, we'd rather be pelted by problems, drenched in dysfunction.

God, in his authority has told us how to view and handle our money—why? Because he wants us to live the best possible version of our lives! And as hard as it is for us to accept sometimes, it begins with the tithe. Bringing the first 10<sup>th</sup> to the house of God, to the local church. That part belongs to God, but God has put it in our hands to test our trust. To see if we will step under his authority.

The principle is really pretty simple: God blesses what we entrust to him. If we want God to bless our families we entrust our families to him. If we want God to bless our careers, we entrust our careers to him, if we want God to bless our health we entrust our health to him. And if we want God to bless our finances, we entrust those to God as well.

Janet and I chose to tithe, to bring that first 10% to God, when we first got married, and we've never looked back. And I don't know how exactly it works, I just know it does. I know that we can live better on 90% of our income than we can on 100%. And we don't tithe because we're on staff here at the church and need to set a good example. We do it because we trust God, and we wouldn't want to miss out on the blessing!

This is an area where a lot of us are stepping out from under God's authority. And we wonder why we're being pelted by problems and drenched in dysfunction. Tithing is not about God's need to receive, or the church's need to receive, it's about the blessing we receive when we give. It's about how God takes those gifts and uses them to reach the lost, and help the broken, and offer light to the world.

How are you doing with this part of God's authority in your life? Make the decision to step under God's umbrella. Make the decision to work toward the tithe. One percent at a time if you feel like you have to. Far too many Christ followers are faithful in everything else, but this.

I could talk about how putting ourselves under the authority of God's word means we connect in community, in small groups, how it means we choose to live beyond ourselves, and so many other things, but one final way **we put ourselves under the authority of God's word is by accepting the gift of salvation.** Yes, God's a loving God, God has tender love. But God's love is also tough. God disciplines those he loves, and we will face the consequences of sin. So there's no way we're prepared to hear the good news, which is the Gospel, until we hear the bad news.

What's the bad news? We are in trouble. We're all fallen and fallible. We're separated from God and God loves us so much he commissioned Jesus Christ to live a perfect life and to die a sacrificial death and to rise again. And if I make a faith decision, the righteousness of Christ is transferred into my life. And because of his power, not mine; because of his grace, not mine; because of his octane, not mine, I can live the life. It's from the inside out.

You see, the ultimate act of responding to God's authority is to accept what Jesus did and begin to live the life, putting your whole life under his umbrella. Learning to live the life, learning to accept God's grace when you fail, learning to be teachable, learning to love this adventure.

Accepting this aspect of God's authority is about getting honest with yourself and with God and simply saying in your own words, "God, I'm sorry for the way I've lived, rebelling against you, doing wrong, avoiding what's right. I turn from all that right now. Thank you for the sacrifice you made for me. Please come into my heart, be the leader of life, be my authority." That's getting under God's big umbrella, that's where living the best possible version of your life begins, no matter where you are, no matter what you've done or are doing, it can begin today. God's authority is his love, and he loves you more than you could ever imagine or believe. And for today that is the good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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