

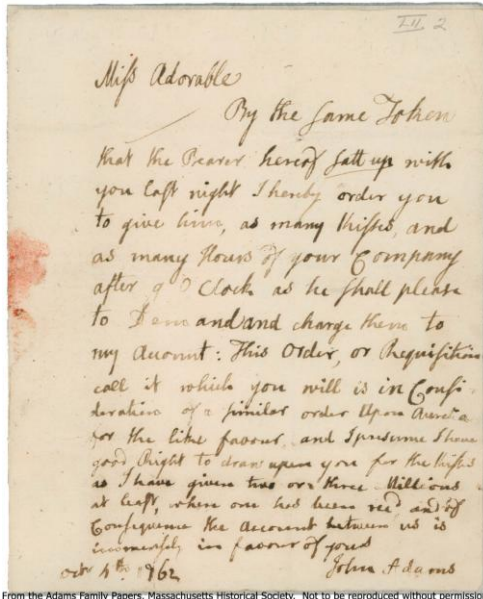
¹⁵ Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. ¹⁶ I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. ¹⁷ When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no"? ¹⁸ But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." ²⁰ For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. ²¹ Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, ²² set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

²³ I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. ¹ So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. ² For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? ³ I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. ⁴ For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.



Two weeks ago I used the illustration of a love letter written to a wife by her husband. I would hazard a guess that most husbands in this room have never written a single love letter to their wives, or at least have not done so since their dating years. When it comes to love letters, I don't know of anyone who exceeds the letters written between John Adams, the second president of the U.S., and his wife Abigail. During their courtship and fifty two years of marriage, they wrote almost 1,200 letters to one

another, which are carefully preserved to this day. Here is just one example and as you will see, they had a playful exchange of affection between them.



Miss Adorable

By the same Token that the Bearer hereof satt up with you last night I hereby order you to give him, as many Kisses, and as many Hours of your Company after 9 O'Clock as he shall please to Demand and charge them to my Account: This Order, or Requisition call it which you will is in Consideration of a similar order Upon Aurelia for the like favour, and I presume I have good Right to draw upon you for the Kisses as I have given two or three Millions at least, when one has been received, and of Consequence the Account between us is immensely in favour of yours,

John Adams
Octr. 4th. 1762¹

We twenty-first century husbands could learn a lot from this guy. There is no question that the words of love that they shared typify what we would call a love letter. Love letters always have kind and thoughtful words of deepest affection toward the beloved. Sometimes they are very serious and other times more playful like this one from John Adams, but they are always sweet and uplifting. Can you imagine a love letter that contained harsh words or offered stark criticisms? We would call that hate mail, not a love letter. But this is precisely the kind of love letter that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth.

The love letter in question is what we call the second “lost letter” of Paul to the church in Corinth which he describes in 2:4. *For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.* Obviously, this is not a love letter between husband and wife but more like a letter from a father to his children. For that is what Paul was to the Corinthian believers—he was their spiritual father and as such, this fatherly relationship sometimes required strong words. But it was nevertheless a love letter. But if you recall from two weeks ago, Paul was put into the position of having to defend himself against attacks from false apostles and those who followed the false teachers. Chapters ten and eleven were specifically written to defend himself. In the NIV, the chapter ten heading is “Paul Defends Himself” and the chapter eleven heading is “Paul and the False Apostles” but this section is labeled as “Paul’s Change of Plans.” I think the NIV has it wrong and this section should also be labeled something like “Paul Defends Himself.” We need to understand the extremely difficult position he was in. If he defends himself too vigorously, he could come off as sounding defensive and self-exalting but on the other hand, if he did not answer these charges, the gospel message that he faithfully preached would come into question and Paul could not allow this. As we will see, Paul was so skillful that he not only defended his ministry but while he was offering his defense, he weaved in some amazing and deep theological truths. And we can learn from both—from his defense and from the deep nuggets of truth.

The first point I want to bring out comes from his defense—true love sometimes needs to speak hard truths. Paul wrote them a letter that contained harsh criticism of massive sin in their body of believers. This was contained in what we call the second “lost letter.”

Let me explain that letter by reminding you of what led up to it. If you recall this chart, Paul wrote two letters which were lost, 2 letters which were preserved and made three visits to the city. In 1 Corinthians he mentioned that he had hoped to spend the winter in Corinth and be with the believers. This pleasant visit never happened because prior to that planned visit, Paul had to make a brief, emergency visit to Corinth because he had heard about serious sin in their midst. This what Paul referred to as the “painful visit.” Shortly after the painful visit, Paul wrote the second lost letter which was also painful and inflicted godly sorrow. (2 Cor 7). It is this letter which I am calling an apostolic love letter, though the same title could be ascribed to all of Paul’s letters.

AD 52

1st Visit (initial church planting)

AD 55-56

1st Lost Letter

1 Corinthians

2nd Visit

2nd Lost Letter

2 Corinthians

3rd Visit

Here is my point—true love sometimes needs to speak hard truths. We understand this on an intellectual level but we tend to reject it on an emotional level. It is most easy to grasp in the parent child relationship. Good parents must develop a habit of loving correction toward their children. Children do not do well in an authoritarian household nor a permissive household, but they thrive within an environment of loving correction. We don’t do as well with this in our other relationships. If you love someone there will be times when you need to lovingly correct them, bit more often than not, it is not received as love. Sometimes we are called judgmental or worse when we refuse to back down from clear truth.

I came upon an illustration of this from an unlikely source—Joel Osteen. I am no fan of Osteen, but in this example, I found myself rooting for him. Two weeks ago, Osteen appeared on the Piers Morgan show on CNN in one of Morgan’s first shows after replacing Larry King. Morgan asked Osteen if he believed that homosexuality was a sin. Here was his answer.

“Yes, I’ve always believed, Piers, the Scripture shows that homosexuality it’s a sin,” he said. He added: “But you know, I’m not one of those that are out there to bash homosexuals and tell them that they’re terrible people and all of that. I mean, there are other sins in the Bible, too. I think sometimes the church — and I don’t mean this critically — but we focus on one issue or two issues, and there’s plenty of other ones. So, I don’t believe homosexuality is God’s best for a person’s life. I mean, sin means to miss the mark.”

His answer was a little wishy-washy but basically on target. Next, the host asked Osteen if singer Elton John is a sinner. He responded:

“Well, it’s strictly back to what the Scripture says. I mean, I can’t — I can’t grab one part and say God wants you to be blessed and live an abundant life, and not grab the other part that says, you know what? You know, live — live that kind of life. So it comes back to the Scripture. I’m not the judge. You know, God didn’t tell me to go around judging everybody.”

Because Osteen took a stand on truth, the host blasted him for being judgmental. “I’m not so sure though, you see. I think you are a kind of judge. And I—I think you can’t abrogate that responsibility. I think what—because of your influence—there’s seven million—eight million viewers every Sunday, when you say things like homosexuality is a sin, it’s a big statement to make. You are a judge, and you’re encouraging your congregation to believe that.”²

I realize that this is what we should expect from the non-believing world. We will be judged by them for holding to our standards of Biblical truth, but it is especially sad when believers are labeled as judgmental when they lovingly confront a fellow brother or sister in Christ. In order for us to grow in our walk with Christ, we need to be able to speak hard truths into each other’s lives. I know that this sounds like Christianity 101 and that’s because it is. Can we agree that this is a good thing? Paul wrote this difficult letter, but it was a letter of love mingled with his tears. There were probably tears that fell onto the original parchment of his original letter. So how do we speak truth into the lives of other believers without being labeled as judgmental?

Let me suggest the best way to do this—invite others to speak into your life. How many times have you thought about talking to someone about an important topic but you never go through with it because you are afraid of how that person will respond? We think, “Should I say anything or not? Will he get mad if I mention this? Well, I better not say anything.” Take that same scenario but this time the person you wanted to talk with had already invited your feedback. At some point they had said to you, “Look, do me a favor please. If you ever see something in my life that needs to be changed, let me know. Don’t be afraid to tell me what you think.” If this person had invited that level of feedback from you, how likely would you be to share your concerns with them? You would be very likely to do so, but without such an invitation the likelihood drops considerably. I have two questions for you. One, do you have a friend that you can trust to speak truth into your life and two, have you invited them to speak truth into your life? Just as Paul had the right to speak truth into the lives of the believers on Corinth, so we have the right and responsibility to do so for one another, but we need to invite others to do this for us. Speaking the truth is one of the best ways to show love for one another.

If you recall from last week, Paul was explaining why he changed his original plans to visit them and how he rooted his explanation in the gospel message that he, Silas and Timothy had preached to them. He continues on in verse 20. *For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ.* How many promise did God make? The Talmud says that there are 613 commandments in the Old Testament. This number is disputed but Paul’s point is that out of all of the promises that God has made, all of them have their fulfillment in Christ. We saw this first hand all the way through our time in the book of Genesis. Do you remember the promise to the serpent in chapter three? “He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.”

This was the first hint of the gospel. The seed of Adam would crush the head of Satan but his heel would be struck in the process. This was accomplished by the death and resurrection of Christ. The promises of land, descendants and a shared blessing all have their fulfillment in Christ. Paul did not develop a long theological treatise here, but I think he mentioned this as part of his defense of his ministry. This was his point. There is only one gospel and it is the one I preached to you. It is the one that fulfills all of Scripture and was culminated in Christ. This other message and these other apostles have no link to Biblical history and have no gospel at all.

Paul capped off that phrase in the second half of verse 20. *And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.* Now here is a bit of trivia for you. Do you know the Hebrew word for Amen? It is amen.³ Let’s try another trivia question. Do you know the Greek word for Amen? It is *amēn*.⁴ Greek and English are a transliteration of the Hebrew word. A transliteration is when you do not translate the word but merely pronounce it and spell it with English letters. More importantly, what does the word amen mean? It is the truth and I agree with it!

But did you know that “amens” were spoken both as affirmations of blessings *and* curses? We see an example of a curse in Deut. 27:15 . “Cursed is the man who carves an image or casts an idol—a thing detestable to the LORD, the work of the craftsman’s hands—and sets it up in secret.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” “Amens’ of blessings are much more common. Then I will fulfill the oath I swore to your forefathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey’—the land you possess today.” I answered, “Amen, LORD” (Jer. 11:5). So I think this goes back to the point about inviting feedback from others. If they speak truth into our lives, we need to say amen to it. If they try to tell us that we are going down the wrong path or are concerned about a decision we have made, we need to say amen to it. In so doing, we admit that they are speaking truth and we agree to what they are saying.

But right at this point we have to be very careful what we do with this information. If we are aware that there is a sin or spiritual need in our life, how do we go about changing this? It is far too easy to boil down the Christian life into a set of moral rules that we must follow. Of course the Bible is filled with standards of morality that God lays down for us but we make a terrible mistake if we simply vow to try harder. When we do this, we turn the Christian life into a high jump. God’s standards are way up there and our behavior is way down here so what we need to do is jump higher to reach that standard. If we jump and fail enough times we get extremely discouraged and begin to think that it is not worth our effort and we stop trying so hard. But the problem with trying too hard or eventually giving up is that the focus is on ourselves.

Listen to what Paul has to say about this. *Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ.* This is the starting point of any life transformation. This is the core of our identity in Christ. This is the foundation of our faith. God is the one who makes us stand firm in Christ. We don’t stand firm in Christ by trying harder and jumping higher to reach the standard but we stand firm in Christ because God has made it so. This is the difference between religion and relationship. In a religion you are always working and in a relationship you are always resting. I know that last part won’t make sense to some of you because you instinctively know that relationships take work. If you want your marriage relationship to grow, the last thing you should do is do nothing, right? Then how can our relationship with Christ be one of rest? We can rest in

this relationship because we know that it is safe and secure. We can rest in the knowledge that God will not reject us when we miss the mark of his holy standards.

We rest secure in this relationship but that doesn't mean we sit idly by. Three verses later Paul wrote: *Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.* Now hang on here. Paul has just got done saying that God makes us stand firm in Christ but now we stand firm by our faith. Which is it—does he make us stand or do we do it? We stand firm because he has made us stand firm. Because he has made us stand firm we can have faith that we will stand firm.

Let me try to give an analogy. In my junior year in high school I had to have emergency surgery one night. I had eaten recently so they were not able to use general anesthesia but instead gave me an epidural. When I woke up in the recovery room a few hours later, I had absolutely no feeling in my legs. Periodically, the nurse would come along and pinch my foot and ask me, “Can you feel that?” The first couple of times I couldn't feel a thing. It was like my legs were completely paralyzed. I couldn't move them and I couldn't feel anything. It was very eerie feeling. Do you think I believed that I would walk again or do you think I believe I was paralyzed? Even though I couldn't wait for the feeling to come back into my legs, I had no doubt that I would walk again? Why? Because I had the knowledge that it was only a temporary thing. Now what if the doctor had come into the room and explained that during surgery they had accidentally severed my lower spinal cord and I would be paralyzed for the rest of my life? Do you see, in both cases, at that very moment, the absence of feeling in my legs was exactly the same. The only difference between the two scenarios is that in the one I was given the knowledge that I will walk again and in the other I was told that I would never walk again. My actions and my beliefs flow directly out of that knowledge.

This is what is happening here. If I stumble and fall in my Christian walk, I can have one of two responses. If I believe that *I* must stand firm or else God will reject me, then I am in trouble. I need to work harder and harder to earn God's acceptance and love. But if I believe that God *makes* me stand firm, that I rest on his unchanging grace and not upon my fickle emotions, that I trust that he has pardoned my sin and that I cannot earn one ounce of forgiveness in a thousand lifetimes, then, and only then can I have faith to stand firm. I stand firm because he has made me stand firm.

As if that were not enough, Paul goes further in glorious truth. *He anointed us*—that's the gift of the Holy Spirit—*set his seal of ownership on us*—we are branded with his stamp of ownership; you are mine, my child—*put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come*—I have given you all of this and there is something much better awaiting you. And then, right in the middle of all of these encouraging words, Paul wrote verse 23. *I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.* In other words, he was saying, don't you see? I wrote this difficult letter to you because I love you and I didn't want to have a second painful visit because I love you. Finally, he finished with 2:4. *For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.*

Through Paul's actions and words, we have seen how to defend ourselves without being defensive; how to speak truth into the life of others, the kind of hard truth that sometimes will bring you to tears; how to invite feedback from a trusted Christian friend. I encourage you to use these principles for God's glory.

Rich Maurer
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¹ <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17621004ja>, accessed on February 2, 2011.

² <http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/01/27/the-osteen-moment-your-own-moment-will-come-soon-enough/>
accessed on February 3, 2011.

³ Hebrew—

⁴ Greek—ἀμήν (*amen with a long A sound in the second syllable*)