

## **“Truth and Love” (2 John)**

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A lot of us are familiar with the slogans of companies. If I say, “Gillette,” some of us may immediately think, “The Best a Man Can Get.” Or if we think about Nike, we think, “Just Do It.” Dunkin’ Donuts has the slogan, “America Runs on Dunkin’” and the Marines have “The Few. The Proud. The Marines.”

Many churches also have their own mottos or slogans. It seems that nearly all of these mottos are built around three words or three short sentences. (Maybe there’s something Trinitarian to this?) Many churches have some variation of “Love God. Love People. Serve the World.” Others have “Know, Grow, Go.” That means the church is focused on helping people know God, grow in the faith, and be equipped to go and make disciples. Often, the word “love” is found in these mottos, but it’s very rare to have the word “truth” in them. Yet the church needs both love and truth in order to be faithful.

Unfortunately, most churches are either “love churches” or “truth churches”. The love churches tend to focus not so much on the Bible; instead, they talk vaguely about love and peace, or they create a certain emotional mood in their worship services. They try to get people to feel something. The truth churches focus narrowly on doctrine, on having the right beliefs. They try to get people to know certain things about God and the Bible.

The problem with both types of churches is that they are incomplete. True Christianity requires both love and truth. And love is not just an emotion or a mood. It’s not some vague concept that God gives us, allowing us to fill in the details of what it means. And truth is more than just knowing certain facts. If we know the truth about God, we must respond in love and worship. And if we love God, we’ll want to know the truth about who God is and what he requires of us.

Today, we finish looking at the apostle John’s letters. Last week, we read 3 John, because we had some missionaries with us. Today, we’ll read 2 John. And in this letter, we’ll see that John stresses both truth and love. This letter is the second-shortest book in the Bible (3 John is the shortest), but it’s one we don’t want to overlook. One commentator, Danny Akin, says, “The

neglect of this epistle throughout the history of the church has been unfortunate because no letter more beautifully balances the twin Christian graces of ‘love’ and ‘truth.’”<sup>1</sup>

I’ll read the letter in four parts. After each part, I’ll pause to explain what we see. So, let’s begin by reading the first three verses of 2 John:

<sup>1</sup> The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth, <sup>2</sup> because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:

<sup>3</sup> Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son, in truth and love.<sup>2</sup>

John begins by identifying himself as “the elder.” An elder is the same as a shepherd, or a pastor, and an overseer. All these terms refer to a leader of a church. John, though an apostle of Jesus, like Peter (1 Pet. 5:1) he simply identifies himself as an elder. And he’s writing to “the elect lady.” No, he’s not writing to a female politician. He’s writing to a church. We know he’s not writing to a literal woman because later in the letter he uses the second person plural (vv. 6, 8, 10, 12). In other words, he’s not writing to one person, but a group of people. Often, the people of God are referred to as a bride. Here, a local church is called a woman, and the members of this church are her children. She is “elect” because she is chosen by God.

John says he loves this church “in truth.” He loves this church because they are united with John in the truth. John and the members of this church are in *the* Truth, Jesus himself (John 14:6). They both know the truth about Jesus and they have a right relationship with Jesus. In fact, John says that all who know the truth about Jesus love this church. Why? “Because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever.” All true Christians know the truth. But more than that, they have the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, abiding in them (cf. John 14:16–17). That kind of bond and power isn’t just a shared interest among people. It’s not like, “Hey, we all have the same hobby! How about that?” It’s not a passing fad. John and the members of this church, along with all real Christians everywhere, are united to Jesus by the unbreakable bonds of the Holy Spirit. They know the truth and the truth has set them free (John 8:32).

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 221.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Having that bond of God's truth should cause us to love one another. We have been adopted into a new family, a true forever family. Like any family, we don't really get to choose who our family members are. But we better learn to love them.

John also says, in verse 3, that grace, mercy, and peace will be with Christians. Grace is the gift of God, it is unearned and undeserved favor, which includes adoption into his family, his love, his presence, and the promise of eternal life. Mercy relates to the forgiveness of sins. If grace is giving us what we don't deserve, mercy is not giving us over to what we do deserve, which is condemnation. We need both God's grace and his mercy because the truth is that we have loved other people or things more than we have loved God. We exist to love and worship God, to know him truly and to live for him truly. But we don't do that. Yet God, in his grace and mercy, sent his Son Jesus into the world. Jesus, the Son of God and the God-man, lived the perfect life of righteousness that we should live. He always loved God and others perfectly. He never did anything wrong. Yet he died like a criminal, taking on the punishment that we deserve when he died on the cross. He didn't die for his own sins, because he didn't have any. But he died for the sins of those who turn to him in faith and trust him.

Those who turn to Jesus and trust him find peace with God. They now have a right relationship with the world. The fact that we have peace doesn't mean life is easy. But it means we know what the meaning of life is. We know what our purpose is. We know that no matter how much pain we experience, or how difficult things are in this life, all will be well in the end. We know how human history ends: Jesus will return one day to make everything new. We have the promise of eternal life in a renewed, restored world. And that knowledge brings us peace.

I have just outlined, very briefly, the gospel, the good news about Jesus. This message is true. It's based on historical facts and it has been revealed to us by God, who never lies. This message is true and that's why John mentions "truth" four times in three verses. But it's also a message of love, a message which should cause us to love God and love others. Truth and love. Love and truth. If you're truly a Christian, you have both.

In the rest of the letter, it becomes clearer why John wrote this letter. Now let's read verses 4–6:

<sup>4</sup>I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. <sup>5</sup>And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another. <sup>6</sup>And this is love, that we walk according to

his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.

John heard that at least some of the members of this church were walking in the truth and he rejoiced. Whether this implies that some of the members were not walking in the truth or whether John only heard about some of them, we don't know. But verse 4 shows at least three things. One, it brings a pastor joy to learn that Christians truly follow Jesus. In fact, that should bring all Christians joy. Two, Christianity is a day-to-day faith. We don't just learn the truth once. We need to walk in the truth continually. That means that our lives should line up with what we say we believe. More and more, our lives should line up with the teachings of Jesus, whether they come through his words in the Bible or through the prophets and the apostles. And, three, walking in the truth is something commanded by the Father.

In verse 5, John asks the church to obey a commandment that they received when they first came to faith. That commandment is to love one another. And what is this love? Love is obeying all the Father's commandments. Jesus said that his words were the words given to him by the Father (John 5:30; 8:28; 12:49–50; 14:10). And Jesus commanded us through the apostles, too (2 Pet. 3:2). So, to obey the Father's commandments, we need to obey Jesus' and the apostle's commandments. If we love Jesus, we'll do that. You can't love God without obedience, and you can't obey God without love. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). He said, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23).

Again, we see that love and truth cannot be separated. To walk in the truth is to obey the commandment to love one another. And how we do we truly love one another? By obeying Jesus' commandments. This means that we must know—truly!—what these commandments are and we must obey them. And our motivation to obey is love. Truth and love. Love and truth. Truth entails love, and love requires truth.

Part of John's reason for writing this letter is to encourage Christians to continue to walk in the truth. But there's another reason he is writing. There are others who are teaching false things about Jesus. These people are literally antichrists, opposed to Christ. These are the same people John mentions in his first letter (1 John 2:18–19; 4:1–3). Whoever goes against what the apostles taught about Jesus is against Jesus. In fact, John says these people don't even have a relationship with God. Let's read verses 7–11:

<sup>7</sup> For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. <sup>8</sup> Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. <sup>9</sup> Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. <sup>10</sup> If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, <sup>11</sup> for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

John says that deceivers have come into the world, those who don't confess that Jesus has come in the flesh. This was the same problem addressed in 1 John. There were people who didn't think Jesus was really a man, that perhaps he was only a spirit who appeared to have a body. And they seemed to deny that Jesus actually died for sin. John warns his readers so that they too won't be deceived. If they bought into the lies being taught about Jesus, then all of John's hard work would go down the drain.

We must remember that John wrote this letter at the end of the first century. The other apostles had died. And while most of the New Testament was already written, it's not as if nice copies of the Bible were being printed and read by the masses. And the churches that existed weren't well organized. They met in houses, and itinerant preachers went around teaching about Jesus. It would be very easy for false teachers to spread lies in this environment. They might have taught that they had new information about Jesus, that their message was more sophisticated than the primitive teachings of the apostles.

But John says, "Don't be deceived. Those who leave the teachings of the apostles, who claim to be 'progressive,' don't know God." John even says, "Don't let them come into your house. Don't greet them. If you do that, you're partaking in their wickedness." I don't think John means that you can't show any hospitality to people with false beliefs. In this environment, to show hospitality to someone meant you endorsed their ministry. Churches met in houses,<sup>3</sup> and it's likely that John means, "Don't let these people teach false things in your churches." He probably means, "Don't greet them with a kiss, the way you do to other Christians."<sup>4</sup> He doesn't forbid us to say, "Hi," to non-Christians. He doesn't mean we shouldn't eat with non-Christians or let them in our houses. He means we shouldn't pretend they're Christians. We shouldn't

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<sup>3</sup> Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; 1 Tim 3:15; Phlm 2.

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14.

endorse their false views. We shouldn't let them become members of our churches and let them spread their toxic teachings.

Though we live in a different time and in a different place, John's words are very relevant. There are many people who claim to be Christians yet deny what the Bible has to say about very important things. Some people deny that Jesus is indeed God. Others deny that he died to pay the penalty for our sins. They don't like the idea of Jesus bearing the wrath of God that we deserve for our sins. There are many more who don't like what Jesus and his apostles taught about sins. Jesus' teachings have always been unpopular. His teachings on money and greed are unpopular. His teachings on religious hypocrisy are unpopular. Today, his teachings on sexual immorality and the definition of marriage are unpopular.<sup>5</sup> Some people want to claim that they know Jesus yet they leave behind the apostles' teachings about Jesus. They think that we should "go on ahead" of what Christians have believed for centuries.

I hesitate to use words like "liberal" and "conservative" because they are so loaded with political baggage. But they are unavoidable words. I would say that Christianity is both a liberal and a conservative religion. We want to be liberal with grace, with love, and forgiveness. But Jesus defines what real love is. And in that sense, it's a very conservative faith. We conserve the "faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), to use the words of Jude, Jesus' brother. This is a message that doesn't change. It must be conserved and protected from distortion. To move beyond it is not progress. It's regress. (That's why I want to start calling "progressives" "regressives" instead.) Denying the teachings of the Bible is not making progress. Progress would be to move closer to Jesus, and therefore closer to God. That would mean more love for Jesus and greater obedience to Jesus. Moving away from biblical teachings is regress. It's a retreat back to the pagan world that Christianity changed.

In preparation for this sermon, I reviewed a wonderful book called *Christianity and Liberalism*, by John Gresham Machen. It was first published in 1923.<sup>6</sup> Don't let the fact that it's almost a hundred years old let you think it's an irrelevant book. It is a book that all Christians should read. Machen says that the liberal Christians in his day, the ones who had moved on beyond classic beliefs such as the virgin birth of Jesus, his sinless life, his atoning death, and his

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<sup>5</sup> Matt. 5:27–30; 15: 18–20; 19:1–12.

<sup>6</sup> It was published more recently in a new edition with a foreword by Carl R. Trueman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

bodily resurrection, belonged to an entirely different religion. He writes, “[W]hat the liberal theologian has retained after abandoning to the enemy one Christian doctrine after another is not Christianity at all, but a religion which is so entirely different from Christianity as to belong in a distinct category.”<sup>7</sup> This other religion is one that believed, to use the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”<sup>8</sup>

Christianity is based on historical facts. It is not subject to change. It contains certain propositions that must be believed and, if necessary, defended. We must hang on to what is true. There are other things we shouldn’t conserve: our sins, our old and false ways of thinking, certain unbiblical traditions. But the truth must be conserved.

Christians who drift from the truth often do so in the name of love. They think it’s unloving to have theological arguments. But Jesus had theological arguments with the religious leaders of his day, and his apostles had theological arguments, too. Some people think doctrine is divisive. But according to the apostle Paul, doctrine helps us be more mature and more united (Eph. 4:1–16). So-called progressive Christians think love always means welcoming in those who are different. Jesus welcomed the sinner to repent; but their presence in the kingdom of God was conditioned on repentance of sin and faith in him. He didn’t lower his moral standards to widen the tent of the kingdom of God. No, if you read the Gospels, it’s easy to see that his interpretation of the Old Testament was far more stringent. If anything, he raised the bar of righteousness.

It’s true that Jesus was the only one who could cross that bar. And that’s why he died for our sin. But he never condones sin, ever. He doesn’t say, “Oh, just do whatever makes you feel happy.” He doesn’t say, “To thine own self be true,” not in the sense that our true self is our most animalistic and “natural” urges. Jesus doesn’t call us to follow our desires or to find our real selves by pursuing our dreams. He calls us to die to ourselves (Luke 9:23–25).

When so-called progressive Christians say that you can freely violate Jesus’ moral demands in the realm of sex and still be in his good graces, they are wrong. They aren’t loving sinners. They are leading them to the cliff off of which they will plummet to their eternal deaths. The apostle Paul said, “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5–6.

<sup>8</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937), 193.

adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9–10). If that is true, then it would be hateful to encourage people to continue in those practices. But if we call those people to repent, just as we have repented of so many of the same sins, and put their faith in Jesus, they can be completely cleansed of all sin. That is good news.

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man."<sup>9</sup> Turning back from error is repentance. Turning back from error is progress. G. K. Chesterton said we shouldn't be concerned with progress as much as reform. According to him, "Progress is a metaphor from merely walking along a road—very likely the wrong road. But reform is a metaphor for reasonable and determined men: it means that we see a certain thing out of shape and we mean to put it into shape. And we know what shape."<sup>10</sup>

When we read the Bible, we see how the world went out of shape. And what the Bible says about a fallen world and sin matches up with our experience of the world. It matches up with what we see in our own divided and confused hearts and minds. So-called progressives assume that we are always making progress. They assume that human history is continually on the up-and-up. If that is so, why is it that the only perfectly moral man walked the earth two thousand years ago? We're told that Jesus was sinless and that all others have sinned. As Machen said, "Once affirm that Jesus was sinless and all other men sinful, and you have entered into irreconcilable conflict with the whole modern point of view."<sup>11</sup> If the best human life was lived two thousand years ago and no one has come close to matching it since, that tells you something about the human condition.

The Bible reveals God's moral standards. It reveals his intentions for his creation. It gives us a picture of what a reformed world looks like, the shape of the way things should be. As we walk in the truth, we follow the map laid out in the Bible, the one that reveals the path of righteousness. We walk in the truth by staying on that path, not by trying to blaze our own trails.

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<sup>9</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 28.

<sup>10</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 98.

<sup>11</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 76.

John's reminder not to be deceived, not to follow those who think they have progressed beyond the apostles' teaching, is just as relevant today as it was almost two thousand years ago.

I want to speak a bit more about how this letter is relevant today, but before I do that, let's finish the letter by looking at the last two verses. Here are verses 12 and 13:

<sup>12</sup> Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

<sup>13</sup> The children of your elect sister greet you.

John loved the church so much that he wanted to talk them personally. He could have written more, but he would rather have talked about such things face to face. Love is best expressed in person, and talking about difficult matters is often better face to face. But John wanted this church to know that his church, their "elect sister" greeted them. Again, this shows that the one church of the true living God is united by both truth and love.

Now that we've gone through the whole letter, what does all this have to do with us?

The main thing I want us to see is that we need both truth and love. If you love someone, you'll know them truly. I once heard a man who had gone through seminary and tried to plant a church (but who failed at that) rail against theology. It seems that he was starting to renounce the faith he once studied. He said that if Christianity was about a personal relationship with God, it's absurd to study God. But real love pays attention to details. If you love your spouse, you'll want to know what he or she is like. Men, if I ask you what the color of your wife's eyes are, you better have a good answer. It shouldn't just be "blue." It should be "Carolina blue," or "robin's egg blue," or "greenish blue." You would have a specific answer not because you were coldly studying for some test. You know because you have studied your wife. You know what she looks like. You know what she likes and dislikes. You do that because you love her.

And if that's true of your spouse, to whom you may be married for fifty or sixty years, how much truer should that be of Jesus, to whom you will be married for eternity? You should know who Jesus is. You should know his teachings. You should know his word. If you love God, you will know the truth about him and you will walk in that truth.

Think about this: if you love God, why do you love him? You love him because you heard the gospel, the message about Jesus. And that, combined with the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, brought you to faith. And you can't really know Jesus and trust him without loving him. So, the truth about Jesus brings us to love him. And why do you desire to learn more about

Jesus and obey him? Because you love him. Truth and love. Love and truth. Truth fuels love, and love fuels truth.

Most churches fail at balancing truth and love. There are a few churches that pursue truth and neglect love. They can make Christianity seem like it's all about studying for a test. And they can very coldly and ungraciously debate doctrine. When they make Christianity all about hard, cold theology, and fail to extend grace to others, they are forgetting that the truth about Christianity includes the fact that we are reconciled to God only because salvation is a gift. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), but God graciously sent his Son, who left heaven and became a human being. He stooped to our level because we could never rise to his. That means that Christians are not more deserving than non-Christians. We have simply received a gift that God has given to us. Those who know this truth should be the most gracious, joyous, loving people out there.

Truth churches seem to be in the minority, however. I think that most evangelical churches don't focus enough on truth. Instead, they talk about love. Perhaps they don't go the route of liberal or so-called progressive Christians. They don't talk vaguely about love, defining love in a way that is opposed to Jesus' teachings. No, these churches maintain evangelical, biblical beliefs. But in their churches, they focus on mood and emotion instead of the truth. Their worship services are all about creating a feel-good environment. They have exciting music that makes you feel good. The messages are short and uplifting. That's fine. But that doesn't sustain you. That's like eating a diet of candy. Candy makes you feel good briefly, but it leaves you empty and hungering. You can try to go from sugar rush to sugar rush, but that's not sustainable.

If you rely on the high of one worship service to get you through the week, it won't. When the high fades away, you'll wonder if you've lost your faith, because you don't feel the same way. And when you feel down, you'll wonder if Christianity is real. In other words, if you're taught by the habits of your church that Christianity is all about attaining a certain emotional high, you'll be let down very quickly. That won't sustain you through the trials of life.

But if you have truth, you can survive the tough times, or even the boring times. If you're going through a depressing Tuesday, last Sunday's awesome worship music may or may not help. It may help if the words were true and biblical and they help you to remember the truth about the gospel. But if you're relying on the feeling you had being in that worship service, you're out of luck, because the next Sunday is five days away. However, if you're someone

grounded in the truth, you can survive that depressing Tuesday. Maybe you're depressed because your body is hurting and it's failing you. The truth that your Savior and great High Priest knows pain and death can comfort you. The truth that one day you'll receive a resurrected body can give you hope. Perhaps you're depressed because you feel like life hasn't gone the way you hoped it would, and you feel neglected by those closest to you. Perhaps you even feel betrayed. The fact that Jesus was mocked, rejected, and betrayed lets you know you're not alone. The fact that he loves you should comfort you. In fact, the reality that God set his love upon you before the foundation of the world and chose you to be part of his elect lady, the church, should give you peace. That knowledge doesn't remove all the pain of this life, but it puts things in perspective. The truth about God's love for you helps you persevere. The truth about God's love for you should cause you to love God more, which causes you to continue walking in the truth.

Truth and love. Love and truth. We need them both. Let us love God by walking in the truth of his commandments. Let us love God by learning more about him. Let us love one another by obeying God's commands and encouraging each other to continue walking in the truth.