



I heard a story about an elderly man in Phoenix who called his son in New York and said, "I hate to ruin your day, but I have to tell you your mother and I are divorcing—45 years of misery is enough."

"Pop, what are you talking about?" the son asked.

"We can't stand the sight of each other any longer," the man said. "We're sick of each other, and I'm sick of talking about this, so call your sister in Chicago and tell her."

The son was frantic and called his sister, who exploded, "Like heck they're getting divorced," she shouted. "I'll take care of this."

She called her dad immediately and screamed at him, "You're **not** getting divorced. Don't do a thing till I get there. I'm calling my brother back, and we'll both be there tomorrow."

The man hung up the phone and turned to his wife. "Okay," he said, "They're coming for Thanksgiving and paying their own fares. Now, what do we do for Christmas?"

That's one way to get your kids to visit during the holidays! Of course, Thanksgiving and Christmas are a time when we like to open our home to family and friends. But in the ancient Mediterranean world it was much more than that. When someone was traveling from place to place, they'd often need to spend the night in a village where they didn't know anyone. Back then decent people didn't stay in what were called "inns" because they were known to be of ill repute. The profession of an innkeeper was dishonorable and most inns were filthy and flea infested. So they'd stay in homes. Usually they'd bring with them letters of recommendation to vouch for their character, and it was expected that people they'd often never met before would take them in.

This was a big issue for the early church. For the gospel to spread throughout the Roman Empire, Christian missionaries and preachers would travel around and often need a place to stay. It was natural for them to be given hospitality by members of the local churches. You don't have to read far in the book of Acts to see how important this was. Paul stayed in the home of Lydia in Philippi, Jason in Thessalonica, Gaius in Corinth and Philip in Caesarea. Besides that, churches met in homes like that of Priscilla and Aquila. For a church to meet for worship, someone had to open their home.

But, as you can imagine, such hospitality was open to easy abuse. There were false teachers and others who traveled around and

posed as Christians. They were motivated by the desire to persuade believers to leave their faith, or the desire to somehow benefit materially and financially from those they stayed with.

This morning and next week we're looking at the shortest books in the New Testament—2 and 3 John. 2 John consists of just 300 Greek words. It's like John crammed as much as he could on a little postcard and just ran out of room. But he was writing about this very issue. As we've seen from our study of 1 John, false teachers were propagating lies and leading many away from the faith. John has already said, "...they went out from us..." But where did they go? Well, they went to other towns to prey on other churches. So John writes to help those churches know how to deal with that.

How would **you** deal with that? We want our hearts to be open to people. We want to show hospitality, not just to people we know and like, but to others as well. But where do we draw the line? Is there a time and a place to say, "No. You're not welcome here"? John will teach us to hold fast to two inseparables: truth and love.

### **John Greets the Believing Community**

John begins his postcard by greeting the believing community.

**The elder,**

**To the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth—because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever:**

**Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love (verses 1–3).**

He calls himself "the elder" both because he was a very old man and he had a unique leadership role in the church as the last surviving apostle. He addresses his note "*to the lady chosen by God and to her children.*" This could be an individual woman or a way of speaking of another church. Most conservative scholars today believe this was a way of speaking of a local church. We call this personification. The language of the letter lends itself to that. At the end of the letter, he writes, "*The children of your sister, who is chosen of God, send their greetings.*" It's hard to believe he'd send greetings from her nieces and nephews. It's also true that throughout the Bible God's people are personified in female terms. Israel was called a virgin, the daughter of Zion,

and a mother. The church is called the bride of Christ. So *“the lady chosen by God”* was one of the churches of Asia Minor; *“her children”* its individual members; *“her chosen sister”* the neighboring church from which John was writing; and *“the children of your sister”* its members.

Of far more importance is what he says about the church. He says he *“loves them in the truth.”* This applies not only to himself but to *“all who know the truth.”* And he says he loves them *“because of the truth which lives in us and will be with us forever.”* Even God's grace, mercy and peace will only be with us *“in truth and love.”* We'd have to be blind not see how truth and love go together here. Truth is the foundation of our love for one another. We love each other not because we're compatible, or because we're naturally drawn to one another, but because of the truth we share. Not only have we come to know it and believe it, but it lives in us as an indwelling force, and it will be with us forever! So as long as truth endures, in us and with us, our love will endure. And we won't increase the love we have for one another by compromising the truth we hold in common.

Now what we have in the remainder of this letter is the working out of these two inseparables: truth and love. How does this work out in our life together as God's people? How does this work out in relationship to others who deny the truth? So often we sacrifice one for the other. We hold fast to the truth, but we do it in a way that sacrifices love; we champion the truth in a cold, harsh and arrogant fashion. Or we hold fast to love, but we do it in a way the sacrifices truth; we become wishy-washy, never discriminating between truth and error. As John Stott says, “Our love grows soft if it is not strengthened by truth, and our truth hard if it is not softened by love.”

### **The Believing Community Must Not Sacrifice Love for Truth**

In verses 4-6 John applies this truth and love formula to the inner life of the church.

**It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us (v. 4).**

He starts with a kind of commendation. He says it's given him great joy to see some of them walking in the truth.

By the way, isn't that true for us as parents? If you have kids or grandchildren or even nieces and nephews you love, isn't it true we have no greater joy than to see them walking in the truth? We get joy from a lot of things they do. We get joy when they get good grades. We get joy when they make the team or get into the best college. We get joy when they win awards. But we get no greater joy than when they walk in the truth! As parents, it's good to ask ourselves what gives us the most joy about our children. Are we rejoicing in the right things?

But John isn't talking about his biological children; he's talking about his spiritual children—seeing them walking in the truth. Maybe you're discipling someone, or you lead a community group, or you're a leader in our student ministries or CPCKids; you get great joy to see them walking in the truth. That's why you're doing it; that's why you're investing time and energy into that ministry. Later in verse 13 he says he wants to see them face to face so his joy can be made complete. John can say that because he knows some of them are walking in the truth; not all of them but some of them. It's interesting that truth isn't just something we give mental assent to, but it's something we walk in, something we conform our lives to. It lives in us and we walk in it. Lynn and I like to drive down to Stanford and walk the dish. To walk the dish you have to stay on the path. There are even signs that command you to stay on the path. Notice John says the Father has commanded us to stay on this path of truth. Walking in the truth is a matter of obedience to our Father.

But he doesn't want them to sacrifice love for truth. Look what he says in verses 5-6.

**And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.**

The command to believe in and walk in the truth isn't enough; we also need to obey the command to love one another. As we've seen, this isn't something new. Jesus taught this from the beginning. We show our love for him by walking in obedience to his commands, and his primary command is to walk in love. So we walk in truth and love.

A great example of what this looks like comes out of the story of former televangelist Jim Bakker. He described what happened right after his release from prison: “When I was transferred to my last prison, Franklin Graham said he wanted to help me when I got out—with a job, a house to live in, and a car. It was my fifth Christmas in prison. I thought it over and said, ‘Franklin, you can't do this. It will hurt you. The Grahams don't need my baggage.’ He looked at me and he said, ‘Jim, you were my friend in the past and you're my friend now. If anyone doesn't like it, I'm looking for a fight.’ So when I got out of prison the Grahams sponsored me and paid for a house for me to live in and gave me a car to drive. The first Sunday out, Ruth Graham called the halfway house I was living in at the Salvation Army and asked permission for me to go to the Montreat Presbyterian Church with her that Sunday morning. When I got there, the pastor welcomed me and sat me with the Graham family. There were like two whole rows of them... The organ began playing and the place was full except for a seat next to me. Then the doors opened and in walked Ruth Graham. She walked down that aisle

and sat next to inmate 07407-058. I'd only been out of prison 48 hours, but she told the world that morning Jim Bakker was her friend. Afterwards, she had me up to their cabin for dinner. When she asked me for some addresses, I pulled this envelope out of my pocket to look for them—in prison you're not allowed to have a wallet, you just carry an envelope. She asked, 'Don't you have a wallet?' I said, 'Well, yeah, this is my wallet.' After five years of brainwashing in prison you think an envelope is a wallet. She walked into the other room and came back and said, 'Here's one of Billy's wallets. He doesn't need it. You can have it.'

That's what it looks like to walk in love. And it's that kind of bond that will strengthen us and equip us to deal with the threats we face from the outside. In the Greek text, the first word of verse 7 is "because." So, the end of verse 6 and the start of verse 7 should read like this, "*...his command is that you walk in love... because many deceivers...have gone out into the world.*" So when we obey the command to love one another, we'll be able to deal with those who might otherwise deceive us. You see, we can't fight alone. It's only in community we can stand against the lies out there.

A popular YouTube clip titled *Battle at Krugar* pictures this. It shows four lions pouncing on tiny buffalo calf, and it doesn't look good. The lions fight to bring the calf to the ground and begin gnawing. The little buffalo is helpless. That's when the herd of about 100 buffalo show up. A solid wall of muscle and horns encircles the four lions. The largest bulls stand side by side, forming a battering ram of horns at the front of the mass. One at a time, they take turns charging the lions. One bull gores a lion, throwing it ten feet in the air. The lions don't take the herd seriously—until another lion gets gored, and another gets stampeded. Finally, the calf breaks free from the last lion, and the largest bulls chase the lions away. What no single buffalo could do alone the community of buffalo could do together. In the end, the calf was alive and well.

That's what John is saying: it's as we stand together in truth and love that we'll be able to stand when under attack.

## **The Believing Community Must Not Sacrifice Truth for Love**

But in verses 7-11 he says even more about how to do that.

**I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work.**

We've seen we're not to sacrifice love for truth, but here he says I don't want you to sacrifice truth for love. Notice how he describes these deceivers—they don't acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. So in essence they deny the very thing we celebrate at Christmas, what we call the incarnation. When you think about it, it is a scandalous proposition. God taking on human frailty and flesh.

But there's also a logic to it. After returning home from a long tour, Bono, the lead singer for U2, returned to Dublin and attended a Christmas Eve service. At some point in that service, he grasped the truth of the Christmas story: in Jesus, God became flesh. With tears streaming down his face, he says he realized, "The idea that God...would seek to explain itself is amazing enough. That he would seek to explain himself by becoming a child born in poverty ... and straw, a child, I just thought, 'Wow!' Just the poetry ... I saw the genius of picking a particular point in time and deciding to turn on this ... Love needs to find a form, intimacy needs to be whispered ... Love has to become an action or something concrete. It would have to happen. There must be an incarnation. Love must be made flesh."

That's at the heart of our faith and that's what these people denied. John says anyone who denies that is a deceiver and an antichrist. We've seen that language before in 1 John. He's not saying they **are** the big antichrist to come at the end, but they're precursors to his work. So John issues three warnings about them. At the heart of this is he doesn't want them to sacrifice truth for love.

The first warning has to do with our reward. He says, "**Watch out you don't lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully.**" The thought isn't that we might lose our salvation. Salvation is a free gift. We don't work for it. He's talking about losing our reward for faithful service. You throw away precious years involved in what's utterly worthless, and which will be displayed in the end as wood, hay and stubble, and consumed by fire. You'll lose your reward. All through the New Testament that possibility is there. In the book of Revelation, Jesus says something similar: "**I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown**" (Rev. 3:11). These crowns are symbols of authority and honor given to those who've made themselves available to the work of God. If you get involved in something that's grounded on false teaching, your efforts are wasted. You're building nothing but an imposing façade; it may look good, but at the end it will crumble and find no acceptance before God.

The second warning is to not run ahead. He says, "**Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.**" So we're to walk in truth but we're not to run ahead. Walk, don't run! I think John is being a bit sarcastic.

He's saying, "Don't run so far ahead that you leave God behind!" I've heard those who once followed Christ describe their journey in this way: "Well, years ago I went through that Jesus phase, but since then I've learned not everything the Bible says is true. I've grown beyond taking things literally. I've opened my mind up to a different kind of spirituality." John says, "Don't run ahead. Continue in the teaching of Christ." That doesn't mean you can't learn new things, but make sure those things are rooted in the truth of Scripture.

The final warning brings us back to the issue of hospitality. In verse 10 he says if someone comes to you with this teaching, don't welcome them into your home. Some believe this includes not letting them into your church since churches met in homes. We need to be careful with this. This doesn't mean we don't allow anyone into our homes or churches who disagrees with us about anything. As we've already seen, this is talking about those who deny the truth of the incarnation; the central truth of the gospel. It's also talking about people who are trying to propagate those lies. Back then, when you took someone into your home as a guest, you endorsed that person to the entire community. John says if you do that you're "*sharing in their wicked work.*" You're helping to spread their lies! I believe, depending on the situation, there's a time and a place for having people in our homes who hold false views. That can provide a great opportunity to convince them there's a better way. But we do have to be careful. There's a difference between opening your home to someone and providing him a base for his work!

Nor does this mean that we should be harsh and mean spirited to these people. We should speak truth, but always speak it in love. That's the vital balance. Those are the two inseparables: truth and love.

Maybe you've heard of that brilliant group of theologians called the Black Eyed Peas! They're really quite amazing. I've studied some of their writings. When I'm in the shower I even practice! One of their best songs is called, *Where is the Love?* Let me read part of that song to you.

People killin', people dyin'  
Children hurt can you hear them cryin'?  
Can you practice what you preach?  
And would you turn the other cheek?

Father, Father, Father help us  
Send us some guidance from above  
'Cause people got me, got me questionin'  
Where is the love?

It just ain't the same, always unchanged  
New days are strange, is the world insane?  
If love and peace is so strong  
Why are there pieces of love that don't belong

Nations droppin' bombs  
Chemical gasses fillin' lungs of little ones  
With the ongoin' sufferin' as the youth die young  
So ask yourself is the lovin' really gone  
So I can ask myself really what is goin' wrong  
In this world that we livin' in people keep on givin' in  
Makin' wrong decisions, only visions of them dividends  
Not respectin' each other, deny thy brother  
A war is goin' on but the reason's undercover

And here is the clincher line:

The truth is kept secret, it's swept under the rug  
If you never know truth then you never know love

That's what God is saying in his word today: We mustn't sacrifice love for truth, and we mustn't sacrifice truth for love. If you never know truth then you never know love. The foundation for the love we have for one another is truth. It's the truth that God so loved the world he gave his only Son and whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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