

*From its shallow headwaters on Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota, the Mississippi River flows southward to the Gulf of Mexico, spawning and sustaining life along its nearly 2,400-mile journey. To many, the river is a gentle giant – an untiring benefactor of good gifts. The mighty Mississippi is a bountiful, self-replenishing storehouse of nutrients for farmland, a habitat for wildlife, a go to place for all kinds of recreation, and a busy waterway for commerce; however, if it escapes its boundaries, that gentle giant becomes a menacing monster.*

*More than forty dams and about sixteen hundred miles of levees attempt to control the mighty tide of the Mississippi, but there are times when the river flexes its muscle and pushes through these defenses. Disastrous floods turn prime riverside property into lakes, whole towns are erased from the map, and levees in multiple states are wiped out. Without its boundaries, the river brings destruction, not blessing.*

In many ways, love is like the Mississippi River. Love flows with life-giving power, but without boundaries, it can do great harm, and as we will see in this second letter from the Apostle John, the boundary of love is truth.

Now before we get into this short letter, I need to provide you with the setting. This second letter deals with the same problem as the first. The Apostle John is dealing with these Gnostics, these false teachers who claimed to be Christians with special knowledge from God that others did not have. They claimed to have deeper insights about Jesus, when in reality, they denied His deity, they denied that He came in the flesh, and they twisted the truth of God to accommodate the culture around them. They crept into churches, spread their lies, created confusion, did their damage, and now they are on the move, traveling throughout the region trying to scoop up more converts from smaller congregations and Christian homes.

In the days of the early church, there wasn't a Holiday Inn or a Motel 6 for strangers to stay in who traveled into town, and so evangelists and missionaries relied heavily upon Christian hospitality for lodging and support, and for the Christian, as far as they knew, by showing hospitality they could be entertaining angels without even knowing it. So, supporting these strangers who traveled into town was a great honor and opportunity.

Well, for these false teachers, these Christians were easy pickings and they took full advantage of their hospitality. They would come into town, they were strangers, and they would claim to be Christians sent by God with their special knowledge. They would approach those who were in the church, seeking support

and a place to stay, and once they wiggled their way in, they would begin to spread their deceptive and dangerous lies to seek converts.

This became a big threat to the early church, so much so, that precautions were established in a handbook called “The Teaching” and here’s a glimpse of the instructions that were issued to churches, particularly churches without strong discerning leadership. Listen to this:

*Every apostle coming to you, let him be welcomed as the Lord. He will not stay more than one day and, if it is necessary, another. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. When going out, the apostle is to receive nothing except bread until his lodging is located. And if he asks for money, he is a false prophet... But not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet, only if he has the manner of the Lord. Therefore, from his manner you shall distinguish between the false prophet and the prophet... But any prophet teaching the truth, if he does not do what he teaches, he is a false prophet.*

*But everyone who comes in the name of the Lord, let him be welcomed. And then, having tested him you will know him... And if he desires to stay with you, being an artisan, let him work and let him earn his keep. And if he has no craft, take this into consideration according to your understanding how he shall live among you as a Christian without being idle. And if he does not want to act in this way, he is a Christ-monger. Beware of such as these.*

That’s what’s going on – that’s the setting, and it would appear that some well-meaning Christians, motivated by a strong sense of love for others, in the name of hospitality – unwittingly opened their homes to these false teachers, which prompted this second letter by John about the need for discerning love – a love that is expressed within the boundaries of biblical truth.

So, with that said, if you have your Bible, turn to **2 John** and we will begin with **verse 1**. John writes,

**<sup>1</sup>The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth, <sup>2</sup>for the sake of the truth which 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 Son of the Father, in truth and love.**

John, who’s now a very old man, generally thought to be well into his nineties, is the last surviving apostle – the rest have been martyred. He’s truly “**the elder**” – not *an* elder but *the* elder – the patriarch of the church with great spiritual insight

and oversight – when he talks, people listen, and in his greeting, John identifies the recipient of his letter as **the chosen lady and her children**.

**So, who's the chosen lady and her children?** Well, no one really knows for sure and biblical scholars are divided, but there are two common views. Some believe that John is writing to an individual – an anonymous Christian woman and her children personally known by John while others lean towards the view that John is writing to a sister church and its congregation and because of great persecution against the church, John is being somewhat cryptic and is only identifying them as the chosen lady and her children. I think a good case can be made for either view, but maybe the answer is actually somewhere in the middle. Maybe John is writing to a Christian woman who has opened up her own home for worship and fellowship – a local church is meeting in her home which was a common practice in those days. That's how churches started – in homes, and maybe that's the case here.

Now if you notice, in these first three verses, we see this link between truth and love – and when truth and love are in balance – grace and mercy and peace are enjoyed. There is to be a balance between truth and love, they are to co-exist, but if we are not careful, we can over emphasize one at the expense of the other. To us, biblical truth is absolutely crucial and critical, but if truth is not balanced with biblical love, we can become rigid and judgmental in our attitudes – maybe even harsh and cruel at times in the way we deal with others, especially those who disagree with us. Yes, what we say may be exactly true, but it has to be expressed in love – a discerning love.

On the other hand, we live in a culture that pressures us to over emphasize love – at least their version of it, at the expense of the truth. We live in a culture that wants us to accept everyone, no matter what they believe or how they live, to the point that we tolerate, and justify, and – in recent years – even applaud sinful behavior, and that's extremely dangerous not only in this life but in the life to come. Contrary to what some may say, love should not be blind. Real love is discerning, it's bound by truth – even when the truth hurts.

*A man received a call from his wife just as she was about to fly home from Europe.*

**“How's my cat?”** she asked.

He replied, “Dead.”

“Oh, honey, don't be so honest. **Why didn't you break the news to me slowly?** You've ruined my trip.”

**“What do you mean?”** he asked.

*“You could have told me he was on the roof. And when I called you from Paris, you could have told me he was acting sluggish. Then when I called from London, you could have said he was sick, and when I called you from New York, you could have said he was at the vet. Then, when I arrived home, you could have said he was dead.”*

*The husband had never been exposed to such protocol but he was willing to learn.*

*“OK,” he said. “I’ll do better next time.”*

*“By the way,” she asked, “how’s Mom?”*

*There was a long silence, then he replied, “Uh, she’s on the roof.”*

This guy’s dug himself into a hole, but it does drive home the point that love and truth should be kept in balance, or as John Stott put it: *“Our love grows soft if it is not strengthened by truth, and our truth grows hard if it is not softened by love.”*

For John, his love for this chosen lady and her children, whoever they are, is grounded in truth – the gospel truth – the truth that does not change – the truth that **abides** in us – the truth that will remain **forever**. Like John, our love for one another is grounded in the gospel truth of Jesus Christ and the common salvation that we share.

That is the truth that binds us together in love, it’s a discerning love, and John is going to explain that we need to practice it beginning with **verse 4**. He says,

**<sup>4</sup>I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth, just as we have received commandment to do from the Father. <sup>5</sup>Now I ask you, lady, not as though I were writing to you a new commandment, but the one which 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, that you should walk in it.**

As I said earlier, apparently, John personally knew the recipients of this letter, and he was delighted that some were **walking in the truth**, meaning they were obeying the truth, they were practicing it, they were allowing the truth to control every aspect of their lives.

It’s not enough to know the truth or to study the truth – it has to take hold of us – it has to be in our lives – it has to be practiced, and take note that John also mentions love and God’s commandments which speaks to obedience. If you recall from John’s first letter, these were the three tests of a genuine believer – believing the truth about Jesus Christ, loving one another, and obeying God’s commands.

John says, “**And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments.**” If you remember from a few weeks ago, I explained that God has a love language – He told us what it was, and His love language is obedience. That’s what resonates with God, and as an act of obedience, Jesus gave us a key command to **love one another**. Loving one another is an act of obedience to God, it’s a basic command given to us at the very beginning, but this love has to have boundaries, it has to be discerning, otherwise, we will not be loving the way God intended us to love.

Truth and love must be practiced – it’s commanded, but they must also be protected. That’s where John leads us next, so, let’s continue beginning with **verse 7** where he says,

**<sup>7</sup> For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. <sup>8</sup> Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward.**

If you remember from his first letter, John was describing those who departed from the church and the core beliefs of the faith. They left both physically and theologically, which revealed they were never really part of God’s people to begin with, and now they aren’t just the deceived, they are the **deceivers** seeking their own converts.

They rejected the truth about Jesus and His finished work. They denied that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. They don’t believe the Son of God came into this world in the flesh and they don’t believe He is coming again, and John says to the Christians – I know you are loving and hospitable, but **watch yourselves** – don’t get involved with these deceivers, their cults, and their heresies, for if you do, you may not **receive a full reward**.

**Now, what does John mean by that?** Well, I can tell you right off the bat that John is not talking about salvation because salvation is not something we have **accomplished** – Christ accomplished it for us, and salvation it is not a reward – rather it’s a gracious gift.

The rewards that John is talking about are those rewards we receive in the hereafter for serving Christ in the here and now. There is a judgment for Christians, but it’s not judgment for sin. It’s not about salvation – instead, there is a judgment where the character of our actions and our motives are evaluated by the Lord for rewards. This is what the Apostle Paul tells us in **1 Corinthians 3**, beginning with **verse 10**,

*<sup>10</sup> According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. <sup>11</sup> For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, <sup>13</sup> each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. <sup>14</sup> If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.*

There will come a time when Jesus evaluates the quality of our actions and our motives, and those actions and motives that don't measure up – those He considers to be worthless like wood, and hay and straw – they will be burned up as though they never existed. And for those actions and motives that Jesus considers worthy and valuable like gold, and silver, and precious stones – they will be rewarded. What we do, and why we do what we do in this life has a bearing in the next.

So, watch out, be on the alert, abide in the truth, walk in it, have a discerning love so that you do not become deceived and lose your full reward. Then John gives us something practical to think about beginning with **verse 9**. He says,

**<sup>9</sup> Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he 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, and do not give him a greeting; <sup>11</sup> for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.**

Those words, “**Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ,**” are very revealing and almost prophetic in nature for they speak against all religious groups who go **too far** and overstep the boundaries of truth, suggesting that the teaching of Christ is not adequate and we need to add something else to it. It speaks to those who say the Word of God is old fashioned, it's not progressive enough, it needs to be updated, it's too simplistic for the modern mind, and it needs to be reinterpreted to suit our culture. That was occurring in John's day and it's most certainly happening today.

Now, I need to explain **verses 10** and **11**, otherwise we are shutting our doors to unsaved family and friends, and I don't think that is what John has in mind here. In context, in those days, when a person was received in your home and allowed to

stay, you were in effect, vouching for them and their ideas. By allowing them in your home, you were giving your seal of approval, and indirectly participating in their work; therefore, John who understood that Christians had a desire to be loving and hospitable, told them they must also be very discerning as to who they allowed in their homes because they don't want to be seen as endorsing false teaching.

Again, love has boundaries and its truth, and if we are accepting and encouraging those who are twisting the truth, then we are not being loving to anyone.

So, how do we deal with those who come to our door? Should you invite Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses into your home to talk? As a general rule, I would say "no." If a wolf is at your door, why let him in – but if you do, you had better be armed with the truth, because they are armed with lies, and they are subtle lies. Also, do not say or do anything to encourage them in what they are doing. It would be wrong for you to give them any reason to think that you appreciate what they're doing. I have had several encounters at my door, and with courtesy, I tell them up front that I am a born-again believer in Jesus Christ, I know the truth, and they are wasting their time with me.

Bottom line, until you learn how to properly balance love and truth, the best policy is to simply close the door on those conversations.

Now, I will also say, that for some – it's not the guys knocking at your door you need to worry about – it's the flashy smooth-talking preacher on your TV or on your computer screen who spews very questionable doctrine who has your full attention. You have allowed them in your home, and John would say you need discernment too, and as soon as you recognize that the truth is being twisted, turn them off.

Okay, let's look at the last two verses in this letter. Beginning with **verse 12**, John says,

**<sup>12</sup> Though I have many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, so that your joy may be made full. <sup>13</sup> The children of your chosen sister greet you.**

John closes his short letter, explaining he wants to see them **face to face**. There is great joy in genuine Christian fellowship where grace and mercy and peace are enjoyed, but I think there is a point to be made here in light of this letter.

Some could become so paranoid about the dangers of false teachers in their midst, that they cut themselves off from true believers who love Christ and walk in the truth. When people are isolated like that, they are easy pickings and are headed for trouble. There is no need to be paranoid, instead John would say we need to be discerning.

In summary, loving others is commanded and expected of a genuine believer, but with that said, the one who really loves is also the one who tells the truth. Love is like a river, and truth is its boundaries. We need to know the truth, we are walk in the truth, we must stand for the truth, but we must do so with discerning love.

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