

## 2<sup>nd</sup> John

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Please open your Bible to the book of 2<sup>nd</sup> John, or turn to page \_\_\_\_ in the Bible under the chair in front of you. Unsurprisingly, it comes just after the book of 1<sup>st</sup> John. We walked through that book last year.

We've taken a break from the book of Matthew for a few weeks. And now we're in a brief series looking at some of smaller books in the New Testament. We've called it, "Big lessons from Small Books." Though these letters are just about a single page in your Bible, they have truth and application for us that can provide help and encouragement for our walk with Christ. They're like taking a shot of spiritual espresso – they're concentrated and packed tight with truth, love, and urgency.

We'll look at 2<sup>nd</sup> John this morning, and Lord willing, 3<sup>rd</sup> John next week. The John who wrote these letters is most likely the same one who wrote the gospel account that we have, the same one who was a beloved disciple of Jesus. If we were to recreate the timeline of John's life, we would see something like this...

- John begins to follow Jesus (30 AD)
- Death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus (33 AD)
- Destruction of Jerusalem temple (70 AD)
- John writes his Gospel & Letters (85-95 AD)
- John writes Revelation (95-96 AD)

Church history tells us that John was an elder or a pastor at the church in the city of Ephesus. And by the time he writes these letters, he's an older man himself, maybe in his 80's or 90's, and he writes with a fatherly tone to these believers. And he's writing to a people who seem to be weary and confused.

Apparently, some in their church had drifted astray, following teachers who were traveling around and leading people astray. And so the church is struggling. They're tired. They're confused. They don't know who to trust or what to believe.

And because they're worn out, John wants to give them a word to both encourage them and to call them to continued diligence and discernment. And this is a message God wants us to hear today as well.

Why is this important for us today? Well, because we live in a time where truth is slippery, love is often misunderstood, and false teachings creep into our lives like unwelcome guests. Whether it's the subtle lies of our culture or the louder voices trying to stir up controversy and division, we need an anchor to keep us steady. 2<sup>nd</sup> John reminds us of the truth and love we have in Christ and calls us to follow Jesus in that way. And so there are helpful lessons in this brief letter that will be relevant for us today, especially if you find yourself weary or confused, tempted to just go with the flow or follow the crowd.

You can imagine 2<sup>nd</sup> John like you're sitting down with a dear friend over coffee, and they lean in close, their eyes filled with care and conviction, and say, "I need you to hear this—it's important." That's the tone of 2 John. John wants us to listen close to what he has to say under the inspiration of the Spirit. He's got something to say that we need to hear. So listen as I read this whole letter, just thirteen verses.

### **Read 2<sup>nd</sup> John 1-13**

#### **Intro**

Has there been a time in your life when you've had to hold two opposing things together? There were some friends from my Bible college in town a few weeks ago, and I was reminded that I served as an RA or resident assistant in the dorm for a brief time. (that was before Josh and I were fired, but that's a different story...)

As an RA, my job was to help the other guys and enforce the rules of the college. My brother was also an RA at the dorms at Purdue. He had a similar role, though his experience was much different. Instead of making sure that the guys cleaned their rooms or were in dress code, he was instead making sure that they weren't drinking or doing drugs in the dorm.

He told me that one time he had to be two things at once for one of his guys. One of the residents had some drugs in his room, and when my brother found out, he had to call the police on him. That guy didn't know it was my brother who had turned him in, and so when they came, this guy came to my brother for support and help.

And so my brother found himself in a position in which he had to be both a friend to this guy who was scared and uphold justice and protect the other guys in the dorm. He had to do these two things that seem to oppose each other simultaneously.

In a sense, that is what the apostle John wants us to do with truth and love. Many people might gravitate towards one or the other – I’m a truth guy, we have to live by the truth. Or I’m a love guy – we must accept people as they are. But for John, these two things must be held together. We need to be people of both truth and love.

And that’s what he writes about in this short letter. As we walk through it, we’ll see three big themes emerge: the priority of truth & love, the practice of truth & love, and the protection of truth & love.

## **The Priority of Truth & Love**

Let’s start with the first two verses, look there...

### **2<sup>nd</sup> John 1-2**

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, **2** because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:

John begins by identifying himself as “the elder.” This isn’t just a title of age but of spiritual authority. Again, he’s a seasoned leader in the church, likely writing from Ephesus in the late first century.

And he writes to “the elect lady and her children.”  
Who is that? What is he referring to?

Some have suggested that he’s referring to a specific woman and her family or even the a Babylonian woman named Electa. But there are a few reasons I think he’s most likely talking about the church as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Let me give you just two of them. First, the Bible often personifies God’s chosen people as a woman, usually as a bride, so this wouldn’t be that unusual.

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<sup>1</sup> See discussion in Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2000), 204–205.

Second, the last verse of this letter sends greetings from “the children of your elect sister,” so John is referring to both the churches as elect ladies. This letter is from John in a house church in Ephesus to another church in another place, and they’re both talked about as ladies, sister congregations. So don’t let that language of the ‘elect lady’ throw you. He’s talking about a local church.

Notice then in these first verses, how the concept of truth is front and center right away. John says he loves this church “in truth,” and this truth “abides in us and will be with us forever.”

What is this truth? John doesn’t explicitly explain it here, but we know from his gospel and the other letters that when he mentions the truth, he’s talking about the truth of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Jesus is the truth in Himself and the only way to true, eternal life. In other words, the truth is the gospel.

So John has in mind the person and work of Jesus, and all that this truth means. He is wanting us to bring to mind the reality of who Jesus is – He’s the Son of God, fully divine and fully human. And what He did in His life, death, and resurrection for our sins.

For John, this truth isn’t just a set of facts; it’s a living reality that dwells in us through the Holy Spirit. It’s eternal, unchanging, and foundational to everything we are as Christians. And this truth abides or remains in us, and it will be with us forever. He continues this thought in verse 3...

### **2<sup>nd</sup> John 3**

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son, in truth and love.

John gives a customary greeting, highlighting the grace of God – His divine blessing and undeserved favor. The mercy of God, His pity and compassion for us. And the peace of God – the wholeness and harmony in our bodies and souls, and the reconciliation we have with the Father through Jesus Christ.

And he writes that these things come to us in truth and love. John really wants us to know that he loves us “in truth” and that the Father gives grace, mercy, and peace, “in truth and love.” For John, these are two things that cannot be separated. They must be

held together. They are together in God's love for His people and in John's love for this church.

And this is the fresh clarity that John wants to give us today, this basic truth of the Christian life that we never outgrow – God loves you. God loves you. Brothers and sisters, God loves you. That's the truth.

And this truth abides in us, and it will be with us forever. This isn't a wishful prayer that John wants or hopes to be true. This is a truth that is a promise. That's how it's worded here. It's a declarative statement. John takes the fact that God loves us and that grace, mercy, and peace will be with us forever as basic truth.

In our world of confusion and mixed messages, and unreliable claims and fake outrage and what often seems like one crisis after another, in the midst of all of that – you can trust that God has loved you. This central truth of the gospel gives us an anchor point. It's the walking stick that we can lean on. It's the stability shoes. If you're wearing Hoka's, you know what I mean. This truth keeps us steadily walking forward one step at a time.

So if that seems unbelievable to you or maybe a foggy, sort of vague idea – hear this, God loves you in Christ. That is true. He has proven that in the gospel when He sent His one and only Son to die for your sins. God so loved the world – how? By giving His only begotten son, so that whosoever believes in Him would have eternal life.

I can tell you that I love my wife. I can even point to my wedding ring and an example of my commitment to her. But it's my faithfulness every day, my affection, my service and my care for her that shows that I truly love and cherish her.

Cornerstone, the love of God has been demonstrated for you in real, tangible terms from the foundations of the world in the story of the gospel. If you feel wobbly or weary on your journey today, be reminded that God loves you with a love that is genuine and real and beautiful. It's a love seen in His care for you in providing eternal life and in the million different ways He has proven to be merciful and gracious when what we deserve is only anger and judgment. God loves you. And if that's the only thing you take away from this letter today, I think we've done our job. But there's more for us to see...

## The Practice of Truth & Love

First, John wants us to see the priority of truth & love. Secondly, notice the practice of truth and love. Here we come to the body of this brief letter. Look first at verse 3...

### 2<sup>nd</sup> John 3

I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father.

John writes about his own joy here. He celebrating that there are some who are walking in the truth. To walk in the truth means to live in a way that aligns with the gospel—to let the reality of Jesus shape your thoughts, words, and actions. It's not just believing the right things; it's living them out consistently. And that has caused John to rejoice greatly!

As one of your pastors, we rejoice when we see and hear of brothers and sisters, especially younger brothers and sisters, walking in the truth.

- people living on mission here and around the world (Kate Kelley, Nate Teague, Detroit)
- kids going to camp this week
- young men and women stepping up to serve and lead (Kyle Bordner, Madison Brackett)
- baptizing my children

We should rejoice in the spiritual fruit of others. And I think there's a challenge in this for us as well. Are you and I prone to celebrate the fruit we see in other people's lives? Do you have eyes to see it? Or are you more prone to criticize or ignore the progress others are making? Does your heart rejoice, or does it envy the successes of others?

Do you notice and celebrate when your kids make good choices? Do you express gratitude and happiness when you see that brother or sister walk in victory over sin?

So John is rejoicing, and then he turns to the subject of love again...

### 2<sup>nd</sup> John 5-6

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. **6** 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.

Here, John reminds them of this commandment that they've had from the beginning – to love one another. He probably has in mind the words of Jesus in Matthew 22 where Jesus summarizes the greatest commandment as the command to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. And even there, Jesus is calling on the Law of Moses in Leviticus 17 and the 10 commandments in Exodus 20. This isn't a new commandment. We've known that this is what we are to do since the beginning.

And then John defines love for us explicitly. It's not just a warm, fuzzy feeling or a vague sentimentality. Love is active – it is walking according to the commandments of God. John wants the church to walk according to the commandment that they've had from the beginning, so that they will walk in it.

But the problem is that last word "it." What is that word "it" referring to? I'm going to invite you into my study for a moment. This is the kind of thing that we need to wrestle with if we're going to understand the text rightly. So try to follow me here. You'll be helped if you have the passage in front of you.

Is he saying, you need to love and the way to love is by keeping the commandment to love? That's possible. And yes, John does love to write in a circular fashion. But even for John, I think it's a bit of a stretch for him to say – you need to love. And this is how you love – by keeping the command to love.

So another option, and I believe the better one, is that the word "it" at the end of verse 6 refers to 'walking in the truth' up in verse four. We've been commanded by the Father to walk in truth. And so like the command to love, the command to walk in the truth is one we've had since the beginning.

So I think John is again pairing the command to love and the command to walk in the truth together. You must do both, he says. You need to love one another, and you need to walk in truth. They go together. You with me?

So what does this mean for us? It means that our love must be tethered to the truth of the gospel. We are not really loving others if we are compromising the truth of who Jesus is and what He came to do. That's not love.

It's also not love to live out of line with the truth of the gospel. We can an example of this over in the book of Galatians in which the apostle Paul talks about a time when he had to confront Peter for being prejudice against Gentiles in order to please the other Jews. He was living in the fear of what others might think about him, and so Paul says that his conduct wasn't "in step with the truth of the gospel." (Galatians 2:14)

So it's not just our stated beliefs that reveal what we love or if we're in the truth – it's how we live our everyday lives. Has the truth of the gospel changed the way that you love other people? Has your love for others been deepened and shaped by the way that God has loved you? Do you forgive as God does? Do you encourage and warn when it's appropriate? That's what John is after.

Let me try to give you an example of what this might look like...

Let's take a hard one. How about the situation in which you are called to love someone who doesn't want the truth? When there's a loved one who is continually abusive or manipulative with their words and actions, even narcissistic? They continually refuse to take responsibility for their actions or admit any wrong. They deny the truth. Or they play the victim and talk as though everything is always their fault. And they try to manipulate your love and care for them.

In that kind of situation, love may look like setting a boundary around yourself – I'm not going to put myself or my kids in a situation in which I will be continually belittled. You may tell the person, "I'd love to be with you for this or have you join us for that, but to do that in a healthy way for me, I'm going to need the freedom to leave or end our time early rather than be subject to abuse or manipulation."

But at the same time, an unwise, and ultimately unloving, approach may be to simply write off the other person, to completely cut them out of your life with no possibility of forgiveness or reconciliation. But as we saw, even last week from the book of Philemon, Christians must forgive. We forgive as God has forgiven us.

And as we said then, forgiveness doesn't mean that there are no consequences or that things have to go back to the way they were before. It takes wisdom to discern how to draw some of these lines and hold truth and love together.



And I admit, this is hard stuff. It's not easy.

The Scottish pastor Alistair Begg recently retired from his ministry as a preacher in Cleveland, OH. His preaching is often on the radio. And he's a joy to listen to, even if just for his Scottish accent and the fact that he's a bit snarky sometimes. He once said something about trying to strike the right balance in the Christian life. I can't remember it exactly, but it was something to the effect of, "Oh this is too hard for you? I wonder if it's like taking up your cross and following Jesus?"

That's what this is. Brothers and sisters, we must practice both truth and love. That's what Jesus is calling us to. Let our walk be in line with the truth and shaped by love.

And while I'm talking about Alistair Begg, let me give you another quotation...

Alistair Begg was responding to the demands of our culture that things like homosexuality must either be whole-hearted affirmed or else it must be hated.

But Begg said,

*We do not hate, nor do we affirm. We cannot hate, because of God's Word. And we cannot affirm, because of God's Word. We have to be prepared to say that we are unprepared to rewrite the Bible in order to accommodate a society that needs the Bible and that needs the Jesus who is the focus of the Bible."*<sup>2</sup>

I think that captures what John is talking about. We must not compromise the truth. And we must not give in to hate. We have to uphold what the Bible teaches because we all need Jesus in all of His fullness.

So we've seen the priority of truth and love, the practice of truth and love, and then thirdly, we see...

## **The Protection of Truth & Love**

John is concerned that the practice of truth and love is being threatened by false teachers who are seeking to lead astray people in the church. They are denying that Jesus really had a human body. They were trying to get people to move on from the truth of the gospel. So John warns them...

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<sup>2</sup> Alistair Begg, Sojourners and Exiles, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14klrtNVPo4>

## **2<sup>nd</sup> John 7**

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.

There are deceivers in the world. How do you know they're a deceiver? Well, they're denying the truth about who Jesus is. Specifically, they're promoting what theologians have come to call the heresy of 'Docetism.' It's the denial that Jesus wasn't truly human; that he only appeared to have a physical body.

This might sound like a minor theological quibble, but it's huge. If Jesus didn't come in the flesh, then He couldn't really die for our sins or really rise from the dead. The whole gospel falls apart. The fact that John labels any false teacher who taught that kind of thing "the deceiver and the antichrist" shows just how serious this threat is. It's a big deal. This teaching is anti-Christ or against Christ.

Why were these false teachers promoting this idea that Jesus didn't really come in the flesh? Well, this was part of what would later become a movement labeled 'Gnosticism.' Those who followed this teaching believed that salvation came through some sort of secret knowledge that only they had, and that the physical world, things like bodies and things that you can feel and taste and see, those things are inferior to the spiritual world.

This is what we might call an error of subtraction. They're taking away from the truth claims of the Bible about who Jesus is. They're promoting a teaching or a doctrine that subtracts from the claims that Jesus made about Himself, and the Bible clearly teaches. We see this today in many other religions or 'spiritual' people who want to claim that they affirm Jesus as a prophet or a good moral teacher, but not as God in the flesh. They are promoting something less than the full picture of who Jesus is.

Another error that we see commonly today (and really throughout church history) is the error of addition. This error involves people try to say that you need Jesus plus something else in order to truly be saved. Listen to how John puts it...

## **2<sup>nd</sup> John 9**

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.

The contrast here is between those who abide or remain in the teaching of Christ and those who seek to leave it behind and go on ahead. In this case, to go on ahead is a bad thing. John is warning that we must abide in the truth, the doctrine of Christ or we will not truly have either the Father or the Son. If we try to add to the gospel, then we end up losing the gospel.

Friends, there is no other way to be saved than to put your faith in the finished work of Jesus. He was truly God and truly man, He lived a perfect and sinless life, He died on the cross for our sins, and He rose from the grave on the third day. There is nothing we can do to add to the work of Jesus, no secret knowledge we must attain, no way to earn salvation for ourselves apart from simply believing on Christ as your Lord and Savior.

So friend, if you're not trusting in Jesus alone today for your salvation, then let this be the day that changes. You must abide in Christ. You must rest in what He has done to save you. I hope you'll do that today.

For the Christian who has put your trust in Christ, John is lovingly calling us to abide in the gospel. Stay there! Put down roots! Don't be tempted to move on. Abiding in the gospel means that we have both the Father and the Son. What a promise that is! What more could we need? This is truth. This is love.

But John is eager for us to protect this truth and love. Notice the imperatives that he gives in both verse 8 and in verses 10-11...

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> John 8**

**8** Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> John 10-11**

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, **11** for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

Did you see them? John is calling for us to 1) watch ourselves, 2) not to receive them into our house or 3) not to greet them.

So first, John is pleading for them to ‘watch yourselves.’ You need to be aware of what’s being taught to you and around you. Stay vigilant. Guard your heart against the false messages being circulated in the culture and even in the church. You can’t just check out or go with the flow. You have to stay alert and awake.

Why? Because there’s a lot at stake. If they fall for these lies, they risk losing the spiritual progress they’ve made and missing out on the “full reward” of eternal life with Christ. John’s not saying they can lose their salvation, but he’s warning that false teaching can derail their faith, lead them astray, and diminish their fruitfulness for God’s kingdom.

Then John gets specific. He says do not welcome these false teachers into your house or even greet them. What’s he telling them to do?

Well, we need to understand the context here. First, he’s almost certainly talking about a house church here when he says not to receive such false teachers into your house. That’s likely what the first readers would have understood him to mean. As we mentioned last week, all churches in that day met in homes. And we saw a few weeks ago in Matthew that Jesus ate in a home with tax collectors and sinners. So I believe John is warning against a house church formally receiving a false teacher.

And secondly, we need to know that in the first century, travel was dangerous, both for the traveler and the host. There were no Airbnb’s back then. There were inns, but they would have been expensive and often had a seedy reputation. So people usually stayed in homes.

And in order to ensure the safety of those in the church or community, letters of reference were often required. To accept a guest meant that you were vouching for them, and the host would be responsible. And so hospitality was a big deal—inviting someone into your house church was a sign of endorsement.

By saying, “Don’t receive them,” John’s not telling us to be rude or unloving or to isolate ourselves away from everyone who doesn’t believe exactly what we do. No, he’s saying we should not give a platform to those who deny the core truths of the gospel. We must

not put our endorsement on those who are leading people away from Christ. We should not celebrate what is false.

I'm thankful for our missions team here at Cornerstone and the work that they do to help us practice discernment as a church about the partnerships that we enter and the missionaries and ministries we support. Along with the pastors, we want to be discerning about both the message and practices that we are endorsing as a church. Yes, we want to be loving and serve the nations with the gospel. But we must take care, lest we take part in the wicked works of those who spread false teaching or mistreat people.

Brothers and sisters, on a more personal level, we also need to be discerning in our world today. False teachings aren't always obvious; sometimes they're subtle, wrapped in nice words or popular ideas.

Maybe it's a podcast that sounds spiritual but denies the deity of Christ. Maybe it's a cultural message that says, "Follow your heart," instead of "Follow Jesus." Maybe it's a rage-bait that is seeking to make you angry and upset over things that are either not a big deal or none of your business. Maybe it's just an outsized focus on yourself and your wants and your self-improvement above the need to serve and sacrifice for others.

So when John says, "Don't receive them" that might mean that you don't tolerate them on your news feed or your "for you page." Don't feed on things that appeal to the fleshly part of you that wants to see others torn down or your own selfishness appeased and reinforced. Don't continually put those things in front of you.

Dr. Suess famously said, "A tree falls the way it leans. Be careful which way you lean."<sup>3</sup>

Are you leaning away from the gospel? Are you following people who are leaning away from Christ? Take care which way you lean.

John's word here is a warning that we need today. So can I ask you this morning, are you abiding in the teaching of Christ? Have you tried to 'move on' from the gospel? Or are you remaining there, keeping it before you, preaching it to yourself again and again?

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<sup>3</sup> The Lorax

At the same time, are you guarding your heart against deception? And when someone comes with a message that contradicts the gospel, are we wise enough to say, “That’s not welcome here”?

As John wraps up this letter, he gives a personal word. He’s such a great pastor, and you can just see his shepherding heart here. He says,

**2<sup>nd</sup> John 12-13**

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.

**13** The children of your elect sister greet you.

John is not content with just writing; he longs to be with this church, to see them face to face, to share in their joys and struggles. That’s what true Christian fellowship is about—being together, encouraging one another, and finding joy in the shared life of faith.

One of the great things about technology is that we can now make video calls and see our loved ones, even from far away. And that’s great, and I’m thankful that my kids can talk to grandma and grandpa, even if they aren’t nearby. But there’s something different about being face to face, isn’t there? It’s different to enjoy warm cookies in grandma’s kitchen and give her a hug. There’s a different kind of joy we feel when we’re face to face in the presence of our loved ones.

I think one of the lessons we learned from Covid is that while zoom or facetime or whatever can be helpful, it is no replacement for fellowship in the flesh. We are embodied souls, and being present together matters. Church is more than just watching a sermon on a screen. The fellowship of the saints is best shared in person. John says, that’s how our joy is complete.

So I think this can remind us that we are not intended to live the Christian life alone. It’s not the same to watch a church service online as it is to be among God’s people. Especially as our world gets more and more digital, we as a church should prioritize being together in authentic relationships, face to face.

So 2<sup>nd</sup> John has a basic but relevant message for us all today. Don't believe the lie that you have to choose between love and truth. They go together. We should prioritize them, and practice them, and protect them.

And we must always remember and abide in this truth: we love others in truth because we are truly loved by God. Let's pray...

## **Final Applications**

As the band comes, let me ask you some final questions...

Are you anchored in the truth and love of the gospel? Do you know that God loves you?  
Are you abiding there?

Are you walking in love and truth in your relationships? Have you become unbalanced and need to be tethered again to the truth and love of the gospel?

Are you being watchful and discerning about the voices in your life? Which way are you leaning today?

With the Spirit's help, let's live out the Word God has given us today...