

Loving in the Truth

2 John 1:1 THE ELDER, To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth, 2 because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever:
3 Grace, mercy, *and* peace will be with you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love. (2 Jn. 1:1-3)

I spent some years growing up in a church which prided itself on preaching the truth, and being truth-based. The emphasis was on the truth of sound doctrine, the truth of right preaching. For all of that I am very thankful, and it left a permanent impression on me. But at the same time, as I grew older, I saw what seemed to be a deficiency when it came to real affection between the leaders and the members. Not only so, but some members were treated with actual contempt and unkindness. It seemed the church was strong on truth, but lacking in love. When people left, they were sometimes said to be those of 1 John 2 – they went out from us, because they were never of us. We didn't fellowship with many other churches, because they were all said to be compromisers of the truth and false.

And that criticism had some truth to it. When I emerged from my bubble, I found that many of the churches were strong on love, or what they called love, but weak on truth. They were all about unity, and fellowship, and bringing Christians together, but then doctrine seemed to take a hit. They were not very strong on sound doctrine, and even weaker on living a separated, holy life. It seemed, early in my Christian life, that your choice was either choose a church with truth but little to no love, or a church with love but little to no truth. Truthless love or loveless truth.

Happily, I found that you don't have to choose between the two, and that real love is always truthful, and real truth is always loving. But that took some searching, and learning, and growing. It's something that is very difficult to attain in one's own church, and it is always a struggle to correct what is leaning one way or the other.

And the relationship of love and truth is not simply something restricted to what kind of church you go to. It affects us nearly everywhere we turn. Marriage is a love based in a covenant, which is truth. Unless people feel bound to that truth of having made a covenant, and being in lawful union, their love has no anchor or stability, and will very likely dissolve.

In parenting, parents who allow the child to create the truth, and show loving affirmation no matter what, end up being selfish, permissive parents. Parents on the other hand who are committed to just one truth or idea – that the child be educated or excel at sport, or not embarrass him – often become tyrants, who want that one thing, no matter what.

In the church, you get churches who are veering into truthless love, or you find churches veering into loveless truth. On the one hand: love at all costs, sentimental, man-centred preaching, no discipline, no covenant, no doctrine; on the other: cold, harsh, cruel, tribal, cliquish, even abusive and predatory.

But it also affects how churches interact with each other. If you've ever wondered why there are so many denominations, and so many stripes of Christians, why Christians, who are supposed to be about love, can't seem to get along, it has to do with this very matter of truth and love. You find the ecumenical crowd, who say that love is all that matters, and so if we have unity at any level, we should have unity at every level. They want every church to recognise and fellowship with every other church, and a big, ecumenical unity. They say that people who don't join them are Pharisees and fundamentalists, which ironically, isn't very loving of them.

But then you do get the other side, whose pursuit of truth without love leads to them becoming insular. If they find one area in which they do not have unity with you, then it soon becomes every area. In the pursuit of fellowship only with those who hold the truth precisely as they do, their circle gets smaller and smaller, while they weed out more and more of those they call compromisers and false teachers and false brethren. A sense of suspicion and authoritarianism pervades the group.

Marriage, parenting, church life, the broader body of Christ- in fact, the interplay between love and truth will really affect every domain of life. In the marketplace, in the courts, in parliament, we need love guided by truth, and truth guarded by love.

At first, there seems nothing more straightforward than love and truth. But as it turns out, it is not the majority of people who love in the truth and speak the truth in love. The vast majority of people either love without truth, which is sentimentalism, or hold truth without love, which is ideology.

Learning to love truthfully, and if I may use it as a verb, to truth lovingly, is one of the most important things you will ever learn to do. It may be one of the defining marks of Christian maturity, understanding how these two work together. Finding that balance is the mark of Christian maturity.

The letters of 2 and 3 John are God's gift to us to help us to find exactly that balance. Even though they are the shortest letters in the New Testament, both of them shorter than Philemon, Jude or even Obadiah in the Old Testament, taken together, they are the best explanation of how love and truth are supposed to work together.

Second and 3 John were likely written at the same time, and may even have been delivered as a package along with 1 John. First John was what was known as a circular letter, a letter that was sent to multiple churches and circled among them, which would explain why John does not address anyone in it. John lived his last years in Ephesus, so 1 John probably circled around the churches in those areas, which is modern-day Turkey. Second John was likely written to one of those churches, and 3 John to an individual named Gaius in one of those churches.

Here was the problem. Early in the life of the church, false teachers began inventing their own form of Christianity, or mixing it with some false Eastern religions and Greek philosophies. These false teachers and their false brethren tried to claim that they had the real deal, and the true faith. And these false teachers didn't stay put. They travelled around, and since the inns were dangerous and dirty, they expected the house churches to give them hospitality, and give them a hearing.

So John writes 1 John to explain what real eternal life is, and how someone can have assurance that he or she is really a Christian. He explains what the true gospel is, the one preached from the beginning, and he explains the true actions that comes from someone who has believed the gospel: obedience, love for others, fellowship, separation from the world. 1 John is the statement of how you can know you have eternal life. 1 John is the truth about how to know and love God.

But 2 and 3 John deal with how that love and truth gets worked out, when you have these false teachers travelling around. In 2 John, you had a church that was so concerned about being loving, that they were giving hospitality to false teachers. In 3 John, you have the opposite problem: a man named Diotrophes, so concerned with what he thought was truth, that he was rejecting and casting out true believers. 2 John takes a real life situation and shows the danger of truthless love, and corrects it. Third John takes a real life situation and shows the danger of loveless truth, and corrects it.

So we begin in 2 John today, to approach the topic of truthless love. The book is composed of four sections: the introduction, verses 1-3, an encouragement in verses 4-6, a warning in verses 7-11, and a conclusion in verses 12 and 13. This morning, by just studying the introduction, we can learn two qualities of real, biblical love.

I. Our Love is Limited by the Truth

THE ELDER, To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth,

We believe this is John the apostle, using the title *elder*, as Peter also does in his epistle. Who is this elect lady he is writing to? Some unlikely ideas have been suggested. One is that this is an actual lady and her children. In fact, in the Greek, the words are *Eklekta Kuria*, and some have suggested that was her actual name, either *Eklekta* or *Kuria*, or both. But this is unlikely, because then in verse 13, it appears she has a sister by the same name, and secondly because it seems a bit inappropriate for John to be expressing such personal love for a married woman.

Instead, it's far more likely he is using the word's *chosen lady* as a metaphor for a local church. The church is the bride of Christ, as we see in Ephesians 5 and Revelation. The word for church, in the original language, *ekklesia* is a feminine word. So the meaning is to the church, and the children of this lady are the members of that church.

John says that he loves this local church **in the truth**. That little prepositional phrase makes a world of difference. John doesn't love this church in any way, or to any degree. He loves in the truth. That is, the truth is the boundary or the limit to the way he loves this church.

At first that might sound hard on your ears. How can we limit love? Isn't love supposed to be an ocean of emotion, a feeling with no ceiling? Isn't love unbounded, the freest thing in the world? Isn't that the first principle of love to have completely spontaneous, unbounded expression? No.

John does not love this church in any other way except in the truth. The truth is the wire that conducts his love. The truth is the pipe that carries his love. His love is not a free broadcast to whomever and whatever. His love is not a sprinkler to all things green and beautiful. His love is bolted down and guided and limited by truth.

And then to add to the evidence that truth is the limit and boundary of love, John points out who else loves them in the truth. and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth

In other words, all truth-lovers also love you. If they don't love the truth, then they won't love you, but if they are in the truth, then they will love you.

Someone has said that love and truth are like a train and its tracks. Love is like the train, and truth is like the tracks. You need both. Truth with no love is just a barren railway track. No movement, no journeys, no trade. If you have a lot of truth with no love, you will be a cold, sterile Christian, your head bursting with facts, but your heart like the Antarctic. Tracks with no train.

But maybe even more dangerous than that, would be a train without any tracks. All that power and movement and energy, with no guidance, nothing to control it, direct it and bolt it down, will be more like a weapon than a transportation vehicle.

So it is with love, if it does not have the limiting power of truth. Truthless love is a train with lots of

forward motion, lots of power, lots of momentum, but no direction.

We love *in the truth*. Truth provides the boundary for our love. We do not love beyond what is.

I cannot love you as a Christian, if you are not a Christian. If you are not a Christian, I should love you as my neighbour, as my fellow image-bearer. But I cannot extend to you the kind of love and recognition I give to another Christian unless you actually are that. To call you *brother* or *sister*, when I do not have reasonable grounds to believe you have accepted the truth of the Gospel is not love, it is just trying to be nice, or trying to appear friendly. It may even be flattery.

By the way, that's the crucial reason for making a public profession of your faith – either in baptism, or in membership, so that believers can love you *in the truth*. But if they never hear from your mouth that you are *in the truth*, how do you expect them to love you as a believer? Just because you hang out with believers? Or because you show up in church? No, truth limits our love. And therefore, if you don't state the truth of your profession of faith in Christ, you have limited how we can love you. We are forced to then love you as a neighbour, but we cannot love you as a believer until we know that. We must love you *in the truth*.

This extends to God. I cannot love God for what I would prefer Him to be – that's idolatry. There's plenty of that today. Usually when the sentence starts with the words, “Well, a God of love would never” probably the rest of the sentence will be heresy. We don't get to dictate to God what He must be, and how He must act. I don't get to treat God as a black and white outline in a colouring book, where I get to choose the colours and colour Him in as I please. No, my love is bounded and limited by truth. I must love God *in the truth*.

Second John is teaching that love for God and for man is limited and guided by the truth of God's Word. What God has revealed is the canal in which affections for God flow. Christian love is limited by the truth. Now the intensity and magnitude of your love will surely grow. We are not talking about the *quantity* of your love, but of its *direction*. Your love can and must grow. But it will never outgrow or overgrow truth about the one or ones you love. The moment it does that, it is no longer Christian love.

What that means is that it is not unloving to discern if something said about God is true and fitting and worthy. It is not unloving to judge whether it is appropriate to pray a certain thing, or sing a certain thing, or teach a certain thing about God. It is not unloving to ask people if they are Christians, and if so, how they know it to be so. It is by doing this that we love with the train on the tracks.

Real love is limited by the truth. But following on from that, John has a second phrase which helps us avoid truthless love.

II. Our Love Is A Response to the Truth

2 because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever:

What great truths swing on these tiny prepositions, like rudders guiding massive ships, or bridles controlling great warhorses! First, John said he loves *in the truth*, the Greek word for *in* is almost identical to our word. Now he uses the word *dia*, a three-letter word, which means on account of, because of.

He loves this church **because** of the truth. It is because of the truth that he and the other truth-lovers love them.

What does he mean by this truth is this that abides in us and will be with us forever? Why is this the reason he loves them? Well, there are two options here. One is that he is referring to the gospel they believed.

24 Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. (1 Jn. 2:24)

When you embrace the gospel, and believe in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord, then that living truth abides in you, and always will. You can't lose the gospel.

The second option is that this is referring to Christ. He abides in us, and will be with us forever. But in the end, we don't have to choose between these, because to have the gospel in you is to have Christ in you, to have Christ in you, is to have the gospel in you.

What John is saying is that he loves this church because of Jesus, because of the gospel. That's why he loves them. It's the reason why these perfect strangers now call each other brother, sister, family. It's because of truth. Not niceness, not social parity, not similarity, not familiarity, but truth. It's a response to their Christianity, not a spontaneous feeling of goodwill.

And I think he wants us to notice – it's permanent truth. It's in us, and will be with us forever. If that's the case, then our love is not going to come and go, ebb and fade. If it is responding to truth, then it will be as enduring as the truth is permanent. Truth is what has caused this love and what sustains it.

There's an idea out there right now that love is this unconditional acceptance of everyone and anything, and that if you do not love everyone and everything, and if you oppose anyone in anything, then your heart is full of hate and you are a hater, and you speak hate-speech. But accepting everyone and everything is not loving, anymore than eating everything and anything is healthy. It's not a sign of hospitality to invite absolutely anyone into your home, it is not a sign of broadmindedness to call everything a good idea, it is not a sign of tolerance to call all forms of sexuality equally pleasing to God, it is not a sign of enlightenment to call all theology equally true. This is not love; *it is the desire to be liked*. It is not love; it is the fear of man. It is not love; it is being in love with the idea of love, indeed, a very warped and unbiblical idea of love.

Biblical love is always a response, and a response to revealed truth. We love according to the nature of the thing we love. For that, I need truth about that thing. To love the sea, I have to learn about the sea, preferably go to the sea, experience the sea. To love a meal, I need to know its name, see it, smell it, taste it. To love my wife, I needed to learn about her. First, those common and obvious truths that all could see, but then after that, those truths she would reveal to one seeking her hand. The deeper the truth, and the better those things that the truth reveals, the more the love. In other words, I need truth about the sea, and truth about the meal and my wife to love properly.

To love God, and to love man, and to properly understand God's love for you, you need truth. We put loving God first in this church, because Jesus put it first. But how do you do love God? You need truth about who God is. Who is this God we say we love? Truth about who He is will shape how we love Him.

Is God a Impersonal Higher Being? Is He a Near-Eastern king? A Roman monarch? Is God a Cosmic Therapist? Is God a Super Father Christmas? Is God a Selfish Zeus? Is God a Pal? Is God a Boyfriend? Is He the ultimate comfort and support for your lifestyle? Because if you get the truth wrong about God, you will love God untruly.

It's offensive to our sinful natures that God will not be loved by us any way we please. That's what offended Cain. He wanted to love God his way. He wanted God to accept his self-expression. When we find out that loving God is not about us and our love, it's about Him and His attributes, it offends.

You mean I could be wrong in how I have been loving God? Are you saying God won't respect my offering, when I gave it with all that sincerity? Are you trying to say God won't simply be delighted by my heart of goodwill? Yes, says God. It doesn't matter what you think is in your heart. What matters is truth about who God actually is, what He actually is like, what He actually deserves, and how you actually should love Him. And since He's made no secret of who He actually is, to be dismissive of loving God because of truth shows who it is we are really interested in pleasing.

Christian love is a response to truth. You need truth about God to love Him properly.

Just like you need truth about man. Is your fellow man a good person needing some advice? Is he a wounded traveller already on his way to heaven? Is he a sick patient? Is he a dying rebel? Is he lost? Is he in God's image?

We love **in** the truth, it's our boundary, our train-track. But we also love **because** of the truth. The truth is the reason for our love, the ground and basis of our love. Truth is what we are responding to and loving.

John is not opening the letter this way by accident. He is even using the customary greeting in an ancient Roman letter to drive this truth home. He wants this local church to know that love is limited by truth, and love is a response to truth.

Here are all these false teachers, warping the gospel, leading people into idolatry. Their preachers are going around, looking for hospitality from the churches that met in people's homes. They want to be recognised as Christians, and are appealing to the law of love. Shouldn't we love one another? Shouldn't you accept us because we're Christians?

John's opening volley is, love is limited by truth, and love is a response to truth. And in case the false teachers came with their warped version of Jesus, he makes you doubly certain of the truth of which God is the Christian God.

3 Grace, mercy, *and* peace will be with you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father

The full title of Jesus: Lord Jesus Christ, and then one that is only used here: the Son of the Father. It couldn't be clearer: Jesus is God the Son, fully God and fully man, the Son of God the Father. He wants believers to study the Scriptures, know the gospel, know who God really is, and discern truth from error, right from wrong, good from bad, beautiful from ugly, useful from worthless. If we know truth, then our love will be properly limited, and a proper response.

And how does this grace, mercy and peace come to believers? Look at the end of verse 3: in truth and love.

Perfect symmetry between truth and love. The Christian life is both in perfect balance. John wants this church, and us, to know that there is no contradiction between love and truth. You don't need to accept loveless truth, or truthless love. First lesson: love in the truth, and love because of the truth.