

Love's True Shape

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You hear a knock at the door or a ring at the doorbell. You go outside to see who it is, and standing there are two well-dressed people, with pouches or bags slung over their shoulders. You ask if you can help them and they tell you that they are sharing the good news of the kingdom of God. They have a magazine which looks well printed, with lots of well-written articles about contemporary issues, and quite a few pictures of Jesus with lions and lambs. You realise these are members of a cult that teaches Jesus is the same creature as Michael the archangel, and that salvation is by good works. What do you do? Do you bring them in and talk? Do you buy their magazine to get them off your back? Do you thank them, and but tell them you are not interested? Do you chase them off our street?

That scene is a modern version of something quite old. From the time of the apostles, false teachers have been going around, claiming to be the true Christians, and capitalising on the fact that Christians are supposed to love one another.

Remember, this was a local church in a time when they didn't yet have church buildings. They met in homes. This is long before the Christian church had denominations and different groups. So if someone came to your church's door, the door of the home you were meeting in, and asked to join, or to be hosted, then maybe you might feel obligated to let him in. You might feel that Christians are nice, and nice people will surely accommodate someone who says he is a Christian, right? You might feel that it would be very mean, and unkind, and unChristian to exclude someone, to say no, to turn them away.

John knows that this church was heading into the ditch of truthless love, a love with no boundaries, a love with no clear outline and goal. John knows that this is a church where the train of love is in danger of leaving the tracks of truth, and might soon be plummeting through the meadow of error and false doctrine.

John has already used his greeting to drive home the point that love is limited by the truth, and that love is a response to truth. Now he is going to use another customary part of a Roman letter, the commendation, to again slip in these important teachings regarding the nature of true Christian love. He is going to compliment them, but still make the point about what real love is, before he gets to the really hard stuff in verse 7.

So what he does in these three verses is show how love always takes shape in the form of truth. In fact, he is going to show that love without truth is like water with no vessel to hold it in, it is like fire with no fireplace to keep it and channel. Love is embodied, fleshed out, takes form through truth. Without truth, love is a disembodied spirit. 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (Jas. 2:26)

Love is not a shapeless, faceless, aimless feeling of niceness towards the world. Biblical love, real love, or if we may say it, true love, manifests in truth. These verses will show us that love takes shape through truth, both in true ideas, and in true actions.

I. Love Takes Shape Through Truth

Watch how he shows us that love is always expressed by truth.

Verse 4: John says, I rejoiced when I found some of your children walking in truth. John either met, or heard about some of the members of this church, and he says, they were walking in truth. They were walking in the truth of the commandments from the Father. And John, who told us that he loves in the truth, and because of the truth, was delighted to find these truth-walkers.

But now what does it mean that they were walking in truth, or walking in the commandment? What do truth walkers do? Verse 5 5 And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another.

1Jo 2:7 Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning.

1Jo 3:11 For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another,

The main truth, the main commandment to obey, is to love one another. Truth-walkers are loving one another. And just when you thought that the equation was truth equals love, verse 6 swaps it around. 6 This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it. (2 Jn. 1:4-6)

Truth looks like love, and love looks like truth.

He is deliberately showing us that love and truth are inseparable. If you are walking in truth, then you are loving one another. But if you are loving one another, then you are walking in commandments, which is walking in truth. To put it simply, when you walk in truth, you love, and when you walk in love, you obey truth. *They are not identical, but they are inseparable.*

John is making sure this local church, and we, by implication, never make the mistake of thinking love, by itself is virtuous. He doesn't want us to think that there is this thing called love, like some kind of morally good substance, and if you have it, it is always a good thing. No, love, to be good and pleasing to God, is expressed in truth. It manifests in truth.

You see, love, considered in isolation is simply desire for what we think is good. Love is an inclination towards someone or something that love desires and delights in it. Now, if you know a bit about the words for love in the New Testament, you might know that it might come in different forms. It could be *storge* love – the natural love of a mother for a child. But it is still the same thing: a desire towards the child, to nourish and care for it.

It could be *phileo* love, the love of a friend or a close brother for each other. But it is still the desire for the fellowship of that friend or relative, to share with one another.

It could be *eros* love, the love of lovers and spouses. But it is still the desire for each other, to be one with the other, to delight in each other.

It could be *agape* love, the love of God for His beloved. But it is still the desire that delights in the beloved and moves towards it.

But what ever kind, love is simply desire, inclination, affection towards something. That by itself doesn't tell you if the love is good or bad. It all depends what you are desiring. If you are desiring holiness, that is a good love. If you are desiring evil things, that is a bad love. It's still love, but it's love inclined to what God hates. In 2 Timothy 3, Paul lists out some wrong loves: 2 For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, ..., lovers of pleasure (2 Tim. 3:2-4). Jesus said of the Pharisees

that they they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. (Jn. 12:43)
Balaam loved the wages of unrighteousness; (2 Pet. 2:15). Demas loved this present world, (2 Tim. 4:10). In those cases, love took shape, and the shape was monstrous, evil, ugly. Satan loves too. He takes pleasure in wickedness.

Do you see that it is wrong to say, "All we need is love". Love is just desire, inclination, movement. If someone said to you, "All we need is movement", you would say, "Movement to where?" If someone said, "All we need is enjoyment", you would say, "enjoyment of what?". In each case, we need truth to fill in the blank. Enjoyment of something. Movement to a certain place. Love of something or someone.

The Bible never tells us to have love, or to just feel loving. It always embodies our love with truth. We must love God. We must love one another. We must love righteousness. We must love the Word. We must love the gospel and evangelism and missions. We must love the church.

Love is not feeling generally positive or warm. Perhaps the most common mistake is to think that love is about the same thing as niceness.

It is a great error to equate love with niceness. You meet someone and you come away saying, he is such a nice guy. She is such a nice person. What do we mean? We mean that the person had attractive social characteristics. She had pleasant manners, she showed real interest in us, she wasn't argumentative, or hostile, or difficult. A nice guy is a man who doesn't come across as arrogant or condescending or aggressive. He is funny, pleasant, easy-going.

Now let me say that niceness, defined that way, is an admirable trait. Rightly practiced, it is close to what the Bible means by love is not rude. I think Christians should seek, as far as it lies in them to be nice people. It's understandable why we are attracted to nice people, and repelled by those who aren't.

But niceness and love are not the same thing. I think, if you met Satan in the form of angel of light, you would walk away and say he was the nicest person you ever met. Good looking, charming, funny, pleasant, good manners, amiable, easy to get along with. He would be very nice. But he would have no love at all for you, and plenty of love for himself and for what is abominable to God. Plenty of false teachers were obviously nice guys, or they would never have attracted a following.

On the other hand, you might meet some characters from biblical history, and they might not immediately strike you as nice. If you met Elijah going to do battle with the prophets of Baal, or if you met Samuel going to deal with Saul's disobedience, and put an end to Agag. If you met John the Baptist preaching repentance.

And yet, all of these men were engaged in love at that moment: loving true worship, loving obedience, loving the kingdom of God.

Now this is not to excuse uncalled-for roughness or abusiveness, which 3 John will deal with. We don't get to divorce truth from love, nor do we get to divorce love from truth. But sometimes nice people are not loving and niceness is not loving. And sometimes it is loving even when it won't be thought nice.

The warning here in 2 John is that being nice, or socially pleasant is not the same as love. It's not socially pleasant to carry out verses 10 and 11 of 2 John: don't receive false teachers and don't greet

them. It's not socially pleasant to church discipline people and put them out the church. It's not socially pleasant to rebuke and admonish one another. It's not socially pleasant to say hard and true things to believers who are ill-disciplined, inconsiderate, lazy or self-absorbed. It's not socially pleasant to discipline your own children. But each of those can be, and properly performed is an act of love. The shape of love is not always niceness, but it is always truth.

There are a lot of Christians running around very in love with their love, and in reality, they're just very self-satisfied with how nice they think they are, and how nice their friends are. Who they include in their circle and who they exclude is not based on truth, it's based on personal niceness. And they are actually correct when they say of church discipline or separation from apostates or direct biblical preaching, "Well, that's not very nice." No, it isn't always. But it is love.

II. Love's Shape is True Belief and Actions

If we can use this image, when love is embodied through truth, that truth has two hands. Love is true beliefs, and love is true actions.

The first set you see in all the words here that speak about truth as ideas that have been communicated. 4 I rejoiced greatly that I have found *some* of your children walking in truth, as we **received commandment** from the Father. 5 And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I **wrote** a new **commandment** to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another. 6 This is love, that we walk according to His **commandments**. This is the **commandment**, that as you have **heard** from the beginning, you should walk in it.

The word *commandment* comes up four times, along with three words that speak of communication: received (v4), wrote (v5), heard (v6). This is all speaking about truth as knowledge, as words. Truth is commandments that we learn: we read them, we hear them preached, we receive them and memorise them. Truth as statements: statements that reflect reality. Sentences that correspond with God's created order.

Love takes shape when God gives you knowledge about what you must believe and do. God gives you the goal for the movement; He gives you a description of what is to be loved. He lays down the traintracks for your love and then says, go there. He tells us to love the gospel, and love the church, and love one another. He tells us to love our neighbour, and even love our enemies. He gives us commandments which are the things that please God, and if we love God, then we learn what pleases God.

This local church needed to be interested in the true ideas of Christianity. Here were travelling preachers knocking on their door, claiming to be Christians, and therefore acting like they had a claim on this church's love. So, John says, if your love takes shape, it first takes shape according to the Word you have heard, the commandments you have received, this Scripture being written to you. The way this church's love takes shape is they look for truth about the gospel. They should want to know true Christianity. They should want to know what the Bible teaches about it, what the true doctrine of Christ is. Their love should take the shape of wanting to know what a true Christian is, and then wanting to know the truth about these teachers. They should want to know what these teachers are claiming, not whether they will be thought nice or not nice.

When love takes shape, it first looks for truth about God, the world, and ourselves.

In fact, in God's Word, He not only tells you what to love, He tells you in what order you should love them. He is to be loved ultimately and first. We are to love one another as He has loved us.

Wives and husbands should be loved as Christ loved the church. We should love our neighbours as

fellow image-bearers. We should love our enemies as people God still blesses. This is what Augustine called the *ordo amoris* – the order of our loves. He tells us what should be loved, and to what degree.

When you gain truth about the object of your love, it even tells you how to love it. God tells you to love your food in 1 Timothy 4, but that should be different from how you love the lost. Proverbs 12 tells us to love our animals, but that should be a different kind of love to the love you have for your children.

Imagine someone comes to you with a large sealed box, and says to you, you must love what is in this box. You must not love it more than it is worth, nor should you love it any less than it is worth. You must place it in the right position in the order of all your loves. And you should not love it in the way you love other things, but according to its nature. What should your next question be? What's in the box? Give me truth! Give me knowledge! Give direction to the train, a pipe for the water.

And for all of this, you need truth. True ideas, true knowledge from God's Word, or even from the world, guided by God's Word.

Now that's the one hand of love embodied: true ideas. But there is a second way that true love fleshes out.

Love is embodied, secondly through true actions. Look at all the words that speak of responses.

4 I rejoiced greatly that I have found *some* of your children **walking** in truth, as we received commandment from the Father. 5 And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we **love** one another. 6 This is love, that we **walk** according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should **walk** in it. (2 Jn. 1:4-6)

Three times we have this word *walk*, explaining the other hand of what it is to love. We must now obey the truth, respond to truth, act in light of truth.

Verse 6 says that love is walking according to the commandments. We then read that the commandment is that we should walk in **it**. We're not sure if John meant by **it** "truth" or "love" or "the commandment". But as we've seen, they're all connected, and he probably saw them as interchangeable. What is undeniable is if you are loving, then the logic of verse 6 is, you're walking, acting out that loving truth, or that truthful love.

We often think of truth as ideas, but in the Bible, truth is also actions. There are true actions. When you gain true ideas, and you respond rightly to those true ideas, then you are walking in truth. And that means, you're loving.

Remember what Jesus said so frequently?

Joh 14:15 "If you love Me, keep My commandments.

Joh 14:21 "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him."

Joh 15:10 "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

Joh 15:14 "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.

Back in the eleventh century, the great writer and thinker Anselm wrote that truth is not just statements, but it is possible to have true thoughts, choices, actions, true affections. When an action corresponds with what ought to be, it is true. When you respond, either with an affection, or with an action, that is fitting with what God has revealed to you, then it is a true action, and it is loving. It is fitting, it is ordinate.

The Bible does not contain the idea that truth as an idea can be isolated from truth as an action. Certainly, it's aware of the phenomenon of people claiming to believe truth and not behave accordingly, but the Bible then suggests that the truth hasn't fully lodged. Look how John talks about people who claim to have the idea but don't have the action:

If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. (1 Jn. 1:6)

He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (1 Jn. 2:4)

He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. (1 Jn. 2:9)

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? (1 Jn. 4:20)

Put simply, if you have the left hand, you will have some form of the right. If you have the truth within you, then the truth will manifest outside of you. If truth is in your heart, then truth will be seen in your hands. If you believe the truth, you will behave the truth.

Not perfectly, not all at once. Not without failure. Not without steady progressive growth. But when love is really taking shape, it takes shape as true ideas, and then true responses to those true ideas.

As the next verses explain, the true response to a gospel-denier is to deny that person Christian fellowship. The true response to apostasy is to refuse to host it and give it a platform or a place to grow. And even though it doesn't seem nice, it's actually love. It's true love. It's love taking shape as true ideas and true responses to those true ideas.

What does love look like? It looks like God's truth telling us what something or someone is, and then God's truth moving us to give it what we ought to give it.