

Love's Sharp Edges

7 For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. 8 Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but *that* we may receive a full reward.

9 Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.

10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; 11 for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. (2 Jn. 1:7-11)

A few years ago, I was invited to what's called a minister's fraternal, where pastors of various churches get together for mutual encouragement, sometimes prayer. The man who organised it invited me for coffee, and we had a pleasant conversation. He told me that they got various pastors together from all kinds of churches and they got together for mutual encouragement, and he wanted me to join.

I think minister's fraternals can be good things, so I asked him what churches were invited. He began to list out various churches, and then at one point, he listed a church that I don't believe holds to the Christian gospel.

So I asked him if churches from a cult were welcome. He said they weren't. I asked why not. He said, "they're too far outside what we're happy with". So I asked the man if they had a statement of faith which all the ministers agreed on to join. He said they didn't. Now here was a fraternal of Christian ministers who would all profess to be Christians, and I'm sure many, if not most of them were and are. But when it came to defining that Christianity, a simple statement of faith with the gospel, they were unwilling. Perhaps they thought of that as restrictive, offensive, maybe even arrogant. The only guide for determining who was a Christian, it appeared to me, was if those in charge of the fraternal had a kind of sense that this minister was Christian, but this one was not.

That was a living illustration to me of this whole matter of 2 and 3 John: love and truth. There was an attempt to foster love between fellow pastors, but it seems that truth was hidden in the background, an embarrassing intrusion into the conversation about love. Here was a train of love, without the tracks of truth.

Second and Third John is all about love and truth, how we love in the truth, and how the truth is saturated with and in love. The churches in John's area were struggling on the one hand with truthless love, and on the other hand with loveless truth. Some churches were showing hospitality to false teachers. Other churches were refusing hospitality to true teachers.

As we've studied 2 John, we've seen even in his greetings and commendation, John has been teaching that we love in the truth, and we love because of the truth. We love by believing truth, and by responding in true ways. In verses 7 to 11, we reach the heart of this short letter, where John gives the practical guidance to this church. They need to know that their love has become sentimental and shapeless. So now John will show them that love actually has some sharp edges. He'll show them the three sharp edges of the arrowhead of loving in truth: love recognises dangers to truth, love respects the boundary of truth, and love refuses fellowship to enemies of truth.

I. Love Recognises the Dangers to Truth vv7-8

7 For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. 8 Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but *that* we may receive a full reward.

Verse 7 begins with that word "for", which is a bridge between everything we've seen in the first 6

verses, and everything which now follows. John says, real love loves in the truth, real love loves in response to the truth, real love takes shape in true ideas and true actions **because**, many deceivers have gone out into the world.

Love must travel on the tracks of truth, *because* there are deceivers in the world who do not believe in truth. If love is not guided by truth and loyal to truth, then it may just be attracted to those who believe and promote lies. Truthless love may warm to those who are actually hostile to it. This is why we love in the truth, so that we may see the dangers.

John says that not a few, but *many* deceivers have gone out into the world. That language parallels the language of the Great Commission, “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel”. These deceivers have gone out into all the world with a false gospel, preaching their false views, spreading their false views.

He told us this in 1 John:

1Jo 2:18 Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour.

1Jo 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

If love is not guided by truth, bounded by truth, it may become a dreamy niceness that accepts with open arms all and sundry. But John says, these people are actually destroyers of love, because they are destroyers of Christianity. Like termites eating out the bottom of a wooden ship, this thing, if left alone, will mean there is no ship of love to sail.

And it seems that this church is one whose love might be becoming a little undisciplined, a little shapeless, a little sentimental. She might be the kind who feels so sorry for those termites, and feels that they, too, have a right to life, that they are just being termites.

Why are these people so dangerous?

who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh.

What does this mean? In John's time, there was a false teaching developing. It would come to full bloom about 100 years later, but it was developing during this time. One of the main ideas of this false teaching was that matter—things physical or material— was evil, and spirit was always good. Of course, they then had a real problem explaining the Incarnation: how could the good and pure God, who is spirit, ever have taken flesh and become a man?

So one of the forms that this took was Docetism. These false teachers taught that Jesus never really took a body, but that He projected the appearance of having a body. But of course, if Jesus only gave the illusion of having a body, then He wasn't a real human. And if He wasn't a real human, then He can't be a substitute for humans, which means His death on the cross is useless.

A second form this took was known as Cerinthianism, named after the man Cerinthus. He taught that the Christ-Spirit came upon the man Jesus at His baptism, and left Him just before the crucifixion. But again, that means that Jesus was not the true mediator between God and Man; it means the cross is of no effect.

Now John is pointing out that this is a catastrophic error. This is a danger that attacks the very heart of Christianity.

That's why he goes on to say this in verse 7: This is a deceiver and an antichrist.

The word for deceiver means someone who pretends to be something he isn't, and so leads people astray. He is an impostor. An impostor is a person who has no right to stand where he does.

Antichrist means someone who opposes Christ, and it also means the one who presents a substitute Christ. They are hostile to the true Christ, and then they present you with a replacement Christ, another Jesus, which means another gospel.

The danger is such that verse 8 says that if we don't recognise the danger, we may lose what we worked for, and fail to receive a full reward. Believers who give recognition and fellowship to people who deny the gospel may lose their rewards. Because, as we'll see, when you don't love in the truth, you may be fellowshiping, and assisting those who are hostile to Christ. Like king Jehoshaphat, who was a good king, but he partnered with evildoers like Ahab. One day, he was confronted by Jehu the son of Hanani the prophet: "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? Therefore the wrath of the LORD *is* upon you. (2 Chr. 19:2)

If we love what God hates, by partnering in the work with those who oppose God, we may lose reward.

If anyone's work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Cor. 3:14-15)

Love recognises the dangers. That leads to John's second description of loving in the truth.

II. Love Respects the Boundary of Truth

9 Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.

To know the dangers, you must know the standard.

Here is an image for us in John's words. It is as if there is a border that has been drawn on the ground. The inside of that border is Christian country. Whoever transgresses the border, he breaks out and does not stay or abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. He is not saved. He is not born again. He is not going to Heaven. But he who abides, who stays within the true doctrine of Christ, the true Gospel, has both Father and Son. (John 5:23, Matt 11:27, 1 Jo 2:22)

Why is this so important? Because the gospel, to use this very image, is the boundary of Christianity. A person who believes the gospel, crosses that boundary, and enters the Body of Christ. To believe the gospel is to go from being outside the church, outside salvation, to being in the inside.

Now if you change the boundary, or erase the boundary, by tampering with the gospel, you no longer have Christianity. If you no longer have Christianity, you no longer have Christian love.

Therefore, any attack or perversion on the truth of the gospel, is an attack on the faith itself. It is going for the jugular of Christianity. The most important doctrines in the Bible are those doctrines that are essential to the gospel. They are life support for the whole system of faith. They are not toenails, tonsils or appendices. They are hearts, lungs, brains of the whole thing. They are essentials, fundamentals. We call them fundamental doctrines – teachings essential to the gospel.

Now it's one thing to have an unbeliever, an infidel, to use the old word, who states up front that he

doesn't believe the gospel. But it is a far more insidious and dangerous thing to have someone claiming to be inside the boundary, while denying it. John is saying is that there are people around who claim to be Christians, but are actually pulling the beating heart out of Christianity. A person who claims to be a Christian but denies the gospel, is an apostate. They say they are one thing, but they are actually another.

When John mentions this heresy, he is not saying that this is the only possible attack on the gospel. He is giving one example – an example that was current in his day. However, there are many ways that a person can deny the gospel. If you deny that Jesus is truly God, you have denied the gospel. If you deny that Jesus is the Son of God, and that He has a Father and has sent the Spirit, i.e., if you deny the Trinity, you are denying the gospel. If you deny that man is actually sinful and needs saving from God's anger, you have denied the gospel. If you deny that Christ rose from the dead, or that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked, you have denied the gospel. If you deny that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, you have denied the gospel.

The gospel is that the triune God made man to fellowship with Himself, but man rebelled and fell into sin, for which the penalty is hell. God the Son chose to enter the human race through a virgin birth, lived a sinless life, died as a penal substitute for sinners, rose again, ascended to heaven, and will return. All those who repent of sin and trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness, and a new life of following Him receive eternal life and will not be condemned.

This is the gospel. At the risk of being misunderstood, this is the traditional gospel. It is the gospel that the church has understood from its inception. It is, as John put it, the truth you heard from the beginning. Notice John's emphasis on remaining, conserving, staying with what you heard from the beginning, rather than some innovation, some departure, some new idea.

We love in the truth because it gives us the boundaries and shape of our faith. We can then see who is in and who is out, who is part of the faith and who is not. Love respects the boundaries of the truth. That leads to the practical outworking.

III. Love Refuses Hospitality to Enemies of Truth

10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; 11 for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. (2 Jn. 1:10-11)

Here are the verses that seem like a shock. Can we really do this? How is this still love? First, let's understand what is being commanded, and then let's understand why.

John says, if someone comes to you, and the word for *you* is plural. We don't have a plural word for you in modern English, most other languages do. But John is saying, if someone comes to your church, to your local assembly of believers.

Further, he doesn't just mean, comes to you and attends. Remember, the early church didn't have church buildings; they met in homes. So one coming to you would be a travelling teacher or professing believer from out of town.

In the ancient-near East, strangers to a town or city either had to go to an inn, or they had to be received by some family or connection they had in the town. The inns were dirty; they were places where you were robbed; they were, in many cases, little more than brothels. Christians didn't want to stay there. If you were a stranger in a community, you had no legal standing, so you needed a

patron in the community who would vouch for you. If you were taken in by someone, that person met your needs, protected you, and vouched for you in the community. Your patron turned your status from a stranger to a guest, a visiting member. One of the ways the early church did this was with letters of recommendation, where the travelling preacher, or the travelling Christian brought a signed letter from a known church or apostle that vouched for them.

But once the church meeting in that home took the person in, they were essentially saying, this person is one of us. This person is a believer, part of our community. This preacher is one of our preachers, and we will listen to his teaching.

Now John says, if the one asking for your church's recognition and hospitality does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him. What doctrine? The doctrine of the Christian gospel, with its essential teachings, who God is, who Christ is, why He died on the cross, what we must do. If the one asking to be included in your church, and asking to stand behind your pulpit, and asking to be called *brother*, denies some essential part of the boundary of Christianity, then do not bring him in.

Don't host him. Don't provide a resting place or a platform for his false teaching. Even more so, don't greet him. What does this mean? In the original language, it is literally, don't say "Charein" to him. Charein was a very bland, ordinary way of saying hello in Greek, similar to "Good day" or "Greetings". However, in Christian circles, the greeting was a very important part of Christian love. To extend the greeting was to extend recognition as a Christian. To greet this person in the act of doing this, was to call him *brother*. John says, if you do this, verse 11, then you share, literally, you fellowship with his evil deed. You've become partners.

The meaning is this: don't extend Christian fellowship to a false teacher. Don't ever give a platform to false teaching. Never encourage those deniers of the gospel in their work, or even to think that they are Christians. Separate yourself from their teaching, protect your church, and your understanding of the gospel by giving no hospitality to a false gospel.

Paul uses the same language:

Rom 16:17 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.

1Co 16:22 If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. O Lord, come!

Gal 1:8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. **Gal 1:9** As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

Now why does John insist on this? First, this is not simply a matter of private hospitality, or private personal interactions with cultists. This is an official welcome. This would be extending Christian recognition, and therefore Christian fellowship. It is giving a denier of the gospel a place in the church as a recognised teacher and preacher. You are bringing the Trojan horse full of enemy soldiers right into your city. You are bringing the disease into your home, and a little leaven leavens the whole lump.

Second, the person who comes bearing this doctrine is most likely not just a fellow who has gotten caught up in error and been deceived. This is a teacher, a preacher, a leader who is knowingly spreading this error and opposing the truth. He is not simply a deceived unbeliever. He is an apostate, one who knows the true gospel and rejects it, turns from it.

In the book of Jude, we saw that Jude tells us to make a distinction between the ones who are

deceived and need compassion, and the ones doing the deceiving whom we must treat with swift and severe mercy.

What does this look like for us? Some applications. It means as individual Christians and as a local body of Christ, we must only recognise as fellow Christians those who hold to the biblical gospel. We must love all men, love our neighbour as ourselves, but our Christian love is reserved for those we can vouch for as Christians. And those must be the people who hold to the biblical, historical Gospel, made up of the fundamentals of the faith: who God is, who Christ is, what He did for us on the cross, and how we receive that. It means we guard our membership, by insisting that everyone who joins understands and professes the gospel. Christian recognition goes to biblically recognisable Christians.

It means we must deny Christian recognition to those spreading a false gospel. That means we guard our pulpit from gospel deniers. We do not call cults and false forms of Christianity simply other denominations. We do not call them brothers or sisters or the body of Christ. We do not host them in our pulpit, partner with them in Christian ministry, or endorse their books or sermons.

What about when the cultist comes knocking on your door? Does it mean you cannot extend private hospitality to them? It depends on what you are doing and how you do it. Your home is not hosting a church, and you bringing them in doesn't carry the same endorsement that this context did. But you should always exercise extreme caution when dealing with teachers of false doctrine. The Bible regards them in Jude like those with a contagious disease, and only brief and momentary contact is advisable. In most cases, simply refusing their literature and telling them you believe they are teaching a false gospel, and perhaps giving them something to read (for free), is best.

A believer who is very familiar with the cult in question may be equipped to handle the visit. But I would be very clear: "I'll give you a chance to speak, and then you give me a chance to speak." Then you declare the gospel, show it to be Scriptural, and then end the meeting. Don't send them on their way with well-wishes, but with truth spoken in love: a warning that their doctrine will destroy them.

If you work with a cultist or have a family member who is one, you show them love as a neighbour: compassion, kindness, concern. But if they are in the act of sharing their false gospel, or looking for Christian recognition, then love's sharp edge will once again draw that boundary sharply, and point out where they are, and where the true gospel is.

Why does love have this sharp edge? Because love is protective. Love is not merely niceness. Love is goodness. It seeks the good of all. What is good for a Christian? To be protected from false doctrine. What is good for a false teacher? To be told he is a false teacher. What is good for a person deceived by error? To be told he is in error. Here you can see why we love in the truth. You can see why love responds to the truth. You can see why love takes shape as true ideas and true actions. To draw the boundary of the faith is true, it is good, and it is loving. To defend and protect that boundary is true, good for everyone, and loving.