

When Being a Loving Church Makes You Unwelcoming..

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[0 : 00] But let's turn now to God's Word and to the second letter of John. 2 John, I'm reading the whole book. It's not a long book.

And Josh will be preaching to us a bit later in the service. So 2 John, and reading from verse 1. 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, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever. Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father, and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.

I rejoice greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as you are commanded by the Father. And now I ask you, dear lady, not as though I were writing a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning.

That we love one another. And this is love. That we walk according to his commandments. This is the commandment, just as you've heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.

[1 : 22] 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.

Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we worked for, but may win a full reward. 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. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting.

For whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. Though I have much to write to you, I'd 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. The children of your elect sister greet you. Amen.

[2 : 24] May God bless his word to us this morning. Well, good morning. Do open your Bibles again to this little letter, the shortest book in the Bible, I believe.

To John. Now, I've titled this sermon, When Being a Loving Church Makes You an Unwelcoming One.

That might seem somewhat provocative or even perverse, given I'm the minister in the church responsible for our welcome. And hear me. The greeting and welcoming that John talks about in this letter has nothing to do with showing hospitality to those who come through our doors week by week to our services.

We do want to go out of our way to welcome them. But we need to be clear on what it is to be a truly loving church, because there is a time to offer no greeting or encouragement.

There's a time when a truly loving church will be firm and hard in saying no. Because Christian love isn't a soft, sentimental love.

[3 : 36] It's not about niceness. Because real Christian love is what defends a church against error, against the lies of the world. And so we must be clear on what love is and how it protects us.

But one thing that it must be prepared to do is to say no. And that is anathema to this world, isn't it? It's not very tolerant and inclusive to say no.

But love built on tolerance and inclusivity is really just conformity. Conformity to that which is always changing and progressing. So what's loving one year is backward and intolerant the next.

Real Christian love which protects the church is old and unchanging. It's as old as the law. Now, before we dig in to see how John explains these things to us, we need to orient ourselves a little bit.

As I say, 2 John is the shortest letter in the New Testament. And it comes between two other letters by the same author. 1 John is the longest of the three and deals in large part with a church that has faced a significant portion of its membership, leaving them and leaving the truth.

[4 : 55] So 1 John is to reassure the left behind church. 2 John, which we're looking at this morning, is taken up with what you do when those who've abandoned that gospel, have gone out, come back around your church and seek to influence and win people to their progressive gospel.

And 3 John is taken up with what to do when real gospel workers come around and want to partner with you. So as we turn to 2 John, we're thinking about what to do when the deceivers are around us.

And John tells us two things. First, he says, the truth makes us lovers, verses 1 to 6. The truth makes us lovers. And then secondly, we'll look at the truth stops us being losers, verses 7 onwards.

So first, the truth makes us lovers, verses 1 to 6. Believing and obeying the truth is always seen in and through our love.

Truth and love are two sides of the same coin. They cannot be pitted against each other or held as mutually exclusive. A church that cherishes the truth loves.

[6 : 09] A church which is loving cherishes the truth. Both of those are true and you cannot remove one of them and keep the other. Now, by personality, some of us are more black and white kinds of people.

It's important to us to grasp and understand things just absolutely in every minute detail. We love understanding the truth. And so perhaps what would appeal to someone like that is an afternoon spent with a big, thick theology textbook, understanding deep theological truths or wearing in to the latest theological controversy.

Others by personality are much more relational or be naturally interested in people, want to care and show concern and develop relationships and seek warmth with people.

And that's okay. People are different. But the Bible will not let us hold one of those over the other. Truth and love go hand in hand.

So the person who goes home from having met with other Christians for a service or a group group and all they want to do is point out how lacking others are theologically in ways that crush and undermine and denigrate, well, that is not someone who really does cherish the truth, is it?

[7 : 27] And the person who's so concerned for people and with maintaining a friendship that they won't ever graciously have a hard conversation with their friend when they're being unwise, well, that's not really someone who loves, is it?

Look at what John emphasizes throughout these verses. Verse 1, the children whom I love in the truth, but not only I, all who know the truth love you.

Why is that the case? Why is it that there's a great deal of love for this church? Verse 2, because of the truth that abides in us. Verse 3, grace, mercy, and peace will be with us in truth and love.

And John continues in the same vein with the closest thing to a command in the first section of the letter. It's more of a reminder in verse 5. He says, and now I ask you, dear lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we had from the beginning, that we love one another.

What does it mean to love? It's a word that is used by and about Christians in all kinds of ways. Very often, love is set up as the central characteristic of God, as if he could be divided up in such a way.

[8 : 50] Very often, when people don't like something that a church says, the quip or retort is, well, that's not very loving. I wonder if in common parlance these days, love doesn't mean much more than a kind of warm, fuzzy feeling.

Ah, isn't love lovely? Certainly, if we're relying on rom-coms for any idea about love, then all we're going to be left with is the kind of thing that leaves the heart racing and is driven by nothing other than raw, unbridled emotion.

Well, John is clear in his gospel and in his letters that Christians are to love one another. That's his repeated command and here it is again. And real love is not primarily a feeling.

It's a choice. It's a decision. Think about marriage. You make vows. That's the wedding.

Making vows to one another. Decisions, commitments. Of course, there'll be real emotional ties and feelings warmth and all of that. But real love keeps choosing to be faithful to those commitments, to that person.

[10 : 02] Yes, when all the warm, fuzzy feelings are there, but particularly when the romance of the wedding day is gone and even when the other person isn't cute and lovable. Look at how John describes love in verse 6.

It's not a softy, softy meaning of love. He says, this is love that we walk according to his commandments. This is the commandment, just as you received from the beginning so that you should walk in it.

Notice the logic, verse 5. Here's the commandment you've had from the beginning. Love one another is the commandment. And love means following the commandments. That's what you've had from the beginning.

John defines the commandment singular, the love one another command by pointing to the commandments, plural. Love is living according to God's law. And that's a choice, it's a response.

Love is walking according to God's ways. Are you thinking of love and the law like this isn't an alien idea to us, is it? Remember Jesus' own words that give us the shorthand version of the law.

[11 : 11] He said, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. That's the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. Love is at the heart of God's commandments. It's at the heart of his revelation.

It's the heart of the gospel itself. We love because God first loved us. God's law shapes what love is because his commandments, his truth has a purpose.

His actions toward us in love, all that he chose to do through the Lord Jesus, he did so so that we would love him and love others.

And this is where the connection between love and truth is so plain. God hasn't spoken to us to give us things to debate. That's not what the truth's for. His revelation isn't an intellectual conquest.

[12 : 15] Now look at verse 4. John rejoices to find some walking in the truth as we were commanded.

The truth, the Bible, is to be walked in. Lived, obeyed. It's to be expressed in love. And love is treating God as we should and treating one another as we should.

Serving and honoring him and serving and honoring one another. Now the command love one another here is directed to the church saying as the church you're to love one another.

And it's not that we aren't to show love to others but more that we're to especially love one another here as brothers and sisters. And that fits, doesn't it?

One of the things that the law gives to us is a picture of what God's kingdom will be like when it's fully consummated. The law, Deuteronomy, isn't a book full of lists of ways that God wants to spoil our fun?

[13 : 24] Quite the opposite. It lays before us a vision of what God and his kingdom are like. Where people are cherished. Where relationships thrive.

Where a good design for the world is upheld. Where disaster is avoided. Where evil is restrained. A picture of flourishing that isn't corrupted by sin and its devastating effects upon mankind.

It pictures for us a life of true freedom. Life as it's meant to be. And so that's why John in his first letter can say his commands are not burdensome.

Or as Moses says in Deuteronomy, the commands are not too hard. They're not too far off. As God's word is at work within us. As his truth abides within us.

we can do it. We are to do it. The church is to be the community that displays something of heaven here on earth.

[14 : 31] And so John's focus on the church loving one another fits, doesn't it? For it is in and through the church that God is building his kingdom here on earth. faith. But there's another aspect I think of why John is concerned that the church in particular loves one another.

Because love for one another keeps us in the truth. We'll see one side of that in our second point. But before then it's worth noting that in the upper room discourse when John first gives this big command in John 13 where Jesus is preparing for his departure he talks at length about this love one another command.

And listen to these words. Jesus says these things I command you so that you will love one another. If the world hates you know that it's hated me before it hated you.

If you were of the world the world would love you as its own. But because you are not of the world therefore the world hates you. He goes on they will put you out of the synagogues.

Indeed the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. Our bonds to one another as Christians are stronger bonds than anything else in this world.

[15 : 58] We can disagree on all manner of things even things that can be really dear to us political parties independence COVID climate but for a Christian no concern can ever trump the Lord Jesus because belonging to him puts us at odds with everything else in this world.

And so as a church we always have much more in common certainly about things that are significant we have much more in common with one another than what we differ on. Our bonds together are verse two the truth that abides in us that's the root of our love that we share in that together.

And John describes the bonds in familial language those who belong to Jesus those who have his word at work within them are closer than even the closest relationships we can picture in this world.

So in verse one the way John greets and introduces this church is with familial language the elect lady and her children.

Verse 13 the sister and her children greet you. And again verse four he talks about your children walking in the truth.

[17 : 25] And that pictures vividly for us doesn't it that we are bound together as a real spiritual family. And how vital that is because the world hates us. that's what Jesus himself says.

A day is coming when the world will kill Christians and they'll think they're being moral and righteous for doing so. Our allegiance to one another in the gospel must trump everything else.

Because when we're faced with what the world throws at us it's love that keeps us in the truth. because a church loving one another will produce rejoicing even when everything else is against us.

So what will keep our church standing in five, ten, twenty years time? It's that we choose today and each day to love those around us by walking in obedience together.

It won't always be easy. It may be the case that sooner rather than later we'll have to love some of our number who will be in prison for the truth. It will mean sharing in our brothers and sisters shame, standing with them and not abandoning them because whatever else we disagree on, our bonds in Christ are the deepest ones and our chief concerns are driven by God's priorities for us.

[18 : 59] However, there is another way that love will keep us in the truth and that's what prompted John to write this short letter in the first place. We see that in verses 7 to 11.

The truth, our love in the truth, stops us being losers. From verse 7 onwards, the truth stops us being losers.

Walking in the truth, living lives of godly obedience to the gospel, will keep us from falling prey to those who seek to deceive and draw us away from Jesus.

Walking in the truth will stop us from losing our rewards and from losing God himself. self. The New Testament letters don't tend to give us explicit exhaustive doctrinal statements of exactly what false teachers teach.

Very often we get hints and examples of the fruit of particular errors. And here we don't really get a fully worked through version of what was so disastrous. It was enough to say, verse 7, that there are many deceivers who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.

[20 : 15] Now the particular poison that they were pushing could be down to just what exactly they believe about Jesus' incarnation, his coming in the flesh. It's possible that a heresy around Jesus' humanity was at play.

But whether that's what's precisely being taught or not, I'm not sure. But it doesn't really matter. Because what is plain to us is that the poison being pushed upon this church was something that questioned the very personal work of Jesus.

They're rejecting the plain things about Jesus Christ. There were many deceivers who didn't want the Jesus of the Bible. Rejecting not niche doctrines where genuine Christians might disagree, but actually rejecting the core, the substance of the gospel itself.

The plain teaching about who Jesus is and what he came to do. And John wants to protect this precious church. And so he's warning them about these threats. And his language is pretty stark.

So think about when you bump into one of the cults, the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, who flatly reject the Jesus of the Bible. They'll usually smile and greet you warmly, be keen to talk.

[21 : 33] But what they're doing is peddling a fake Jesus. And look at what John calls them. Verse 7, deceivers, antichrists.

Now, antichrists don't have horns, a teal, and a trident. They are those who scorn or oppose the true Jesus, reimagining him in their own image, denigrating his work, rejecting his rule.

Because to do any of those things is to set yourself against Jesus. And you are antichrist. The reason this warning is so important is because look at verse 7, the first three words of it.

For many deceivers have gone out. Look back at verse 4. John says he rejoices greatly to find some walking in the truth.

So there we have it. Some walk in the truth, many are deceivers. Whether John is being specific to this one church or not, we do see the same thing play out today, don't we?

[22 : 50] We know that it's said that wide is the path that leads to destruction, many are on it, and narrow is the path that leads to life, and few are on it. We need to be realistic.

Many are the deceivers in the world. Many are the opponents of Christ. And it's because of the deception that is at large that any church needs to take seriously walking in the truth.

It needs to take seriously its love. Because that serves as a prophylactic, a preventative. Like when you go on a trip to a far-flung country, you take your malaria tablets to stop you catching malaria.

Well, John's saying walk in the truth, love one another. He's telling us that the preventative to disastrous deception is determined devotion to God's commandments, to him, and to one another.

Now, John says these deceivers have gone out into the world. He could mean there that they've gone out as missionaries, out to spread their poison elsewhere. but it could be that their deception has led them out into that which is worldly.

[24 : 02] When John uses the words in Greek for world, he usually uses it to mean the non-Christian world, the world that's in opposition to God. And that's typical of error, isn't it?

Changing the gospel to something different allows you to do something you otherwise couldn't do. when we change what we believe, it affects how we behave.

You can usually see when someone's hardening their heart to Jesus, can't you? Their behavior changes. Very sadly, I remember seeing it in an old university friend who had professed to be a Christian, but questions about the Lord Jesus arose.

He began to be rethinking things, and that coincided with his desire to live like the world. Girls in gin won the day. The truth is that no deep or deeper discovery of truth ever leads us away from the law of God.

It fits that a false teacher will live in false ways. The telltale sign of whether something is true or not is whether it increases or decreases godliness.

[25 : 17] Well, John has two commands for this church. He says verse 8, watch yourselves, and verse 10, do not receive or greet such a deceiver.

So firstly, verse 8, watch yourselves. I mentioned some of the cults earlier, and they're a fairly obvious example of rejecting Jesus.

It's well established that they don't believe in the Jesus of the Bible. And so for many of us, the place where we need to watch is not going to be those handing out Watch Tower magazine outside Central Station on Buchanan Street.

It's obvious that we're not interested in that. For many of us, it will be through the things we read or listen to, or through relationships with people who in more subtle ways minimize Jesus.

Here are some examples of ways that Jesus can be rejected with a Christian veneer. When people say things like, well, mentions of hell and sin and judgment, it's just a little bit too much.

[26 : 27] We want to major on the attractive, softer parts of Christianity so as to not upset people. Or those who in a spirit of progress and wanting the church to be relevant for today think that, well, Christian ethics, particularly around sex and marriage, it's a bit out of date.

Let's get with the times. Or those who only want to think of Jesus as savior and never really want to think of him as lord or king, someone they actually have to follow.

Or those who want to win us to good causes but make them the central cause over the unseen reality of heaven and hell. novelty is deceptively attractive.

The most dangerous people can seem plausible and pleasant. They'll often be a grain of truth to what they say but we must weigh what they're actually saying.

Does it exalt Christ's saving work? Does it rejoice in submitting to Christ's reign? That's the barometer. John is clear when Jesus is pulled from his cross or when he's dethroned.

[27 : 38] That is the way to loss. That's not progress. It's apostasy. It's the way to loss. Verse 8, watch yourselves so that you may not lose what we've worked for but may win a full reward.

Walking in the truth stops us from losing our full reward. I think there are three losses John talks about in these verses. first there's some sort of reward at the last day.

There is a pattern of the Christian life and ministry that will receive a reward at the last day on top of the glory of resurrection. Paul talks about something very similar in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 where he says the quality of our work, the quality of our lives will be tested by fire.

one outcome is reward because we focused on the right things in the right way and the fruit of a life that's given to the right things will last into eternity.

The people you ministered to, the people you love, the people you encourage in the gospel, they'll be there too sharing it with you and there'll be some form of reward on top of the glory.

[28 : 54] But Paul makes clear that that reward can be lost. He puts it like this, if anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss.

The same word that John uses. Though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. It's possible to be rescued, it's possible to be saved for the last day, but rescued just and no more.

we don't want to lose arriving at the last day with those words ringing in our ears, well done good and faithful servant. There's a way to arrive.

That's the first loss that John seems to be talking about. The second one I think is rejoicing now, reward to come, but rejoicing now. Look at what he says, verse 8.

He says that you may not lose what we have worked for. So there's something that they share together. And look ahead to verse 12. John says, I hope to come to you and talk so that our joy may be complete.

[30 : 12] I think John is saying that one of the things that comes from what they're working together for is joy. He rejoices, verse 4, to see some walking in the truth.

His ongoing fellowship with this faithful church brings joy for him. His completed work, which he shares with them, brings joy. That's another thing that we'll lose if we don't have the full orb'd Jesus.

When Jesus is minimized and we walk in a contracted, limited, skewed version of the truth, then it robs us of the full joy of the Christian life. But more than all of these, the third thing is we lose redemption.

Walking in the truth stops us losing the reward to come. It will see us lose out on rejoicing. But most important of all, verse 9, when someone takes Jesus' teaching and pushes it to the margin, ignores, changes, despises, rejects it, then you do not have God.

Complacency can rob us of good things. Having a fuzziness around the edges of the gospel while still holding on to Jesus, that can rob us of good things now and at the last day.

[31 : 41] But that fuzziness, if we're not really clear on just who Jesus is and what he's come to do, that fuzziness around that can be the thin end of the wedge that opens the door to full on rejection of God himself and thus no rescue, no redemption.

Verse 9, it is those who abide in the truth who have both the Father and the Son. And so John finishes by saying verse 10, do not receive those who muddy the gospel.

Do not even greet them. Now I don't think John is saying we can't have anyone in our house who isn't a full-blown subscriber to the Westminster Confession of Faith. I don't think that's what he's saying at all.

I don't think he's even saying we shouldn't invite in a Jehovah's witness who calls at the door to talk with us. We can talk with him over a coffee about the real Jesus. However, if you are someone who's easily swayed, then struggle with doubts and things, perhaps closing the door and saying, no thanks, is the best thing to do.

But that's not really what John's talking about here. John is talking about not receiving them into the church, not showing support, not accommodating traveling speakers, because that would mean giving them a platform within the church.

[33 : 05] Of course, churches at this time met in houses. And no church should give any platform for anyone to undermine the truth about Jesus.

That's clear. John doesn't say, give them a hearing to be fair to them, give them the benefit of the doubt. No. He says, verse 10, don't give any greeting, no encouragement for someone who's pushing another gospel.

Don't give them a like on social media, don't give them a view, don't give them royalties on their books, no encouragement, no greeting. Why?

Because verse 11, whoever does greet or encourage such a person takes part in their wicked works. Well, that's a very stern word for those who have a responsibility for a pulpit or a book room or for growth groups or for the speakers list at a CU.

There are some for whom the answer is a flat no. You are not welcome here. Why? Because it will poison the church.

[34 : 21] Someone once said that the most important drawer in a minister's filing cabinet is the bin. There are all kinds of invitations and conferences and resources that are pushed on a church that need to go straight in the bin.

Now, if we think John's language is overly strong, if having an unwelcome mat in any church that says jog on, if we think that's too strong, well, we need to know that God is ferociously protective of his church.

That's why this letter's here. And the truth is that John's language here is nothing on the lengths that God has gone to to protect his church. Remember at the birth of the church in Acts, at a key juncture for the survival of the church, God himself struck down Ananias and Sapphira for putting the church at risk with their deceit.

God is ferociously protective of his church. That's why he's given us this letter. Well, I guess that most of us on a week-to-week basis aren't really deciding who steps into a pulpit, but that doesn't mean that we don't need to think about this, because we all have a responsibility to not allow any foothold in our church for this sort of thing.

And so what we each read and listen to is important. We need to be discerning because if we get taken in by something and we encourage our friends to get into it, then suddenly an unhelpful poison can be pulsing through a church.

[35 : 55] Here's one example as we finish. Lockdown gave rise to even more people watching preachers and Christians online, and there are lots of good resources available online.

We're happy to recommend many, and we have lots of great books that we can pick two for that. But for the possible benefits of engaging with Christian resources online, it also brings potential dangers.

And we've sadly seen that play out in real pastoral difficulties with people who've been led astray. Here's something that should give us pause to reflect. If you type into Google basic questions about anything to do with the Christian faith, like who is Jesus, what does the Bible say, things like that, one of the top results on every single page is usually from one of the cults.

They are incredibly savvy about using the internet. Remember, John says, I rejoice that some are walking in the truth.

there are many deceivers who've gone out in the world. Or with something like God TV, I'm not sure that the potential benefit of possibly finding something that may be okay on it is worth the risk of being exposed to all that isn't.

[37 : 17] And the same thing is true for YouTube and all the rest. Some walk in the truth, many are the deceivers. There is a lot more out there that is unhelpful than helpful.

And the most dangerous people seem plausible. If we make a habit of watching online resources, online preachers, that gives them an influence among our brothers and sisters, because it will shape how we think, it will shape what we believe, and how we encourage people and what we recommend.

And the truth is that if our engagement with a preacher is only ever on a screen whilst they're in a different city, country, or continent, then we can't see the most important thing.

Are they genuinely walking in the truth? So here's a question that John would pose to us. What are you doing to watch yourself in what you read and in what you listen to?

John says, watch yourselves so that you may not lose what we have worked for. And he says, I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth.

[38 : 32] That is our best defense. Walking together in the truth and loving one another. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that you first loved us, choosing to rescue, to act, to redeem us.

And we ask for your help now. Grant us all the grace that we need to continue walking in the truth in a world that hates you and hates your people. Amen. increase our love, for we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.