

2 John

The Bonds of Love

If you would, take your Bibles and turn with me to the book of 2 John.

In the Fall of 1940, students at the University of Oslo, in Norway, began to wear paper clips on their lapels. Germany had invaded Norway earlier that year, in April. The paper clip became a quiet statement of Norwegian resistance to the occupation of German forces. Just as a paper clip binds paper together, the students who wore them on their lapel were making a small statement of solidarity, saying in effect, “we are bound together.” Once German occupiers and Norwegian collaborators caught onto the movement wearing a paper clip on your lapel became a punishable offense, since it was a statement of protest about what was going on.

Norwegian patriots chose the paper clip for its subtlety and because it was widely believed that the paper clip was invented by a Norwegian. It became a symbol of national pride that implied Norwegian unity. Those who wore it were saying in effect that they were bound together against the occupation of enemy forces. It was a statement of hope and encouragement to hold fast, not to give in, to resist, and to wait well on liberation.

We are living in a day and time that is growing increasingly dark. We’re emerging from the looming shadow of a pandemic, a little worse for wear. Freedom of speech and freedom of religion are under assault here and abroad. There are riots in our streets. The killing of unborn children continues

to be regarded as a fundamental human right. The sacred institution of marriage has been twisted into something that no other society in the history of the world has ever even thought of. The biblical view of manhood, womanhood, and gender are being demonized and labeled as hate-speech.

We’ve seen at least one pastor arrested and held in Canada with fences being erected around the church building. Christians in Nigeria are being slaughtered by extremists. Crosses and churches are being demolished in China. I could go on, but I think you’ve got the picture. The days are dark, and they are darkening, and that’s what makes 2 John so appropriate for us this evening.

Paul, in his letter to the church in Ephesus, charges them to, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” I want to answer that call. I want our churches to answer that call. Dark days are a time for the brilliance of the light of the gospel in the church of Christ to stand out. Which leads us to ask, how we are supposed to live wisely in these evil days? How do we resist foolishness? Well, the answer, according to 2 John is that we resist and persist by holding fast to one another in the joy and love that comes from abiding together in the truth of the gospel.

That’s what I think that 2 John is all about, and I don’t think that this message could come at a more important time for us. John intended this letter to bring a message of instruction and encouragement to the people of God. It’s a

letter to be read in preparation for and resolution in the midst of dark days. It's a letter that instructs us how to live and how to resist the deceit of our great enemy, Satan. It's a letter that teaches us to hope in the day of our liberation at the second-coming of King Jesus, and it's my hope that God will use our time in this letter to establish us in a unity of love that comes with walking in the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's begin by reading our passage this morning: 2 John v. 1-13.

The Apostle John wrote this letter, likely somewhere around Ephesus, sometime around the end of the 1st Century. While John doesn't mention himself by name in this letter, the ancient writings we have from early church fathers, accompanied with the themes and writing style of this letter collectively indicate that this it was written by John. In this letter, John identifies himself simply as 'the elder,' which supposes that his original audience would have known that John was the one who was addressing them.

John is a bit vague in the way he addresses his audience. That might be because of the severe persecution that would have been going on when he wrote this letter to them. Rather than identifying a congregation or its members by name, he simply greets them in v. 1 saying, "The elder to the elect lady and her children." While some have suggested that John is writing to a particular woman in the ancient world, there's a lot of reason to understand that he's most likely referring to a local church. There are at least three reasons it's best to read this as John writing to a specific church: 1) A lot of

this letter is written in the 2nd-person plural, which makes it unlikely that he is addressing one individual woman. 2) John's use of the feminine in this letter matches other instances where he refers to the church as the bride of Christ and so on. 3) the conclusion of this letter seems to indicate that he is writing this letter on behalf of another congregation to this congregation, when he says, "The children of your elect sister greet you."

As we look at what John has to say to the members of this sister church, the occasion for why he wrote them becomes clear: 1) He wants them to know his joy of finding some of the members of this church, walking in the truth. 2) He wants to encourage them to continue walking in the truth and living in the love that comes with knowing the truth. 3) He wants to see that they are protected from the deception and deceivers who would try to lead them away from the truth. 4) He wants to prepare them for his visit.

The big idea of this letter is that John wants to see this church actively living in the truth of Christ and the love of Christ. Truth and Love are like two great pillars, holding up the Christian experience of God's grace, mercy, and peace. Truth and love are co-dependent. Truth is not made complete without love, and love flows from a knowledge of the truth. John wrote this letter out of concern for the welfare of this other local church, because he was aware of the threat of deception of false-teachers who had gone out into the world. His joy was to see this church walking in truth and love, and so he writes to encourage them and to instruct them to arm themselves with

the truth and love, lest they fall prey to the seductive lies of these false-teachers.

The point of this letter is to teach and encourage local churches in how we are to live together in these last days, as we await the return of King Jesus. That's clearly demonstrated by what John has to say to the church in v. 7 about the deceiver and the antichrist. That's a goal that we can also see in 1 John 2:18, where John writes, "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour."

This isn't the only place you have biblical authors talking this way about our present situation. You find this sort of language all over the New Testament, in passages such as Acts 2:17, Hebrews 1:1-2, and 1 Peter 1:20. The New Testament authors speak about the end times as something that began with the coming of Jesus into the world, which will culminate in a final end, when Jesus will return in his glory, with judgment and salvation, and will make all things new in the fullness of his Kingdom forever. John has, as one pastor has said, an elastic view of this last hour. In one sense this hour has already come, it was present in the first century, and in one sense this hour is not yet, because Christ has not yet come in the fullness of his Kingdom to judge the living and the dead.

The reason I bring that to your attention is that the occasion that caused John to write this letter to this sister church is the same occasion that makes this letter so relevant for Christians today, as we too wait on the coming of Jesus,

and as we seek to be faithful ambassadors of Christ to the world around us.

MP: Love each other and live in the truth so that you may persist in joy and thereby resist deception.

A) The Joy of Truth and Love

B) The Command of Truth and Love

C) The Defense of Truth and Love

A) The Joy of Truth and Love

There's something wonderful about finding out you share some point of contact with a total stranger. A while back, I was pumping gas down in Oostburg, when a car pulled up next to me with a Clemson University sticker on the back. I've been a Clemson fan all my life, but it's down in South Carolina, and so I just don't run into a lot of Clemson Tiger football fans up here. So, here I'm standing with a complete stranger, and we're able to strike up this conversation out of the blue, enjoying this common connection together.

You get a sense of that common joy, in a much, much grander scale, here in John's greeting, "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."

If there's one feature of John's greeting we ought to notice, it's his joy. John's joyful words set a tone of gladness for the rest of this letter. It's important that we see this relationship, because God's people aren't intended to be glum; we're intended to be glad, glad because we have a joy that is

produced by the truth and love that is at work in us through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In his introduction and then throughout this letter, John confesses his love for his fellow believers in this church, but he goes onto say how much joy he takes in them because they know and love the same truth and the same savior that he loves, v. 4, he says, “I rejoiced greatly to find some of you children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. Then in v. 12, he explains that he though he had many things to say to them, he’d rather come and see them in person, “so that our joy may be complete.”

There is something about the truth of Christ at work in the life of a person that produces a love for Christ and a love for those who also know him which produces joy in the heart of a believer. Joy is the natural fruit of the community that is found in partaking in the grace, mercy, and peace that comes from God through Christ to all who believe in him and know him. Joy is like light, spilling from the lantern of truth and love, which guards the church against the darkness of Satan’s lies and devices. Joy that is produced our fellowship in truth and love is a great antidote against the seductive poison of sin. John loved the believers in this sister church, and his love for them meant that he had great joy when he saw how they were walking in/living in the truth of the gospel.

John’s joy is something that we should want for ourselves. As we read v. 1, John makes it very clear that this joy isn’t reserved for apostles, but it’s the common experience of all believers. John says, “not only I, but also all who know

the truth because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever.” This is an abiding joy that you should pursue, with every fiber of your being. Get this joy. How? Well the same way that John got it, by believing the truth of the gospel, walking in the truth of the gospel, and by loving others in the truth of the gospel.

What John seems to be saying is that when we live in the truth of Christ, which as we will see is a way of speaking of trusting in Christ as our savior and lord, that truth will produce in us a love towards others, and that love towards others will produce a joy in us when we see others walking in the same truth that we ourselves have come to believe.

That’s the wonderful, puzzling thing about the church, isn’t it? Look at the people around you in this room. Many of you have little if anything in common with each other, except this, you have come to know that you are a sinner, that you are a rebel against God, and you have believed that Jesus Christ is God’s Son, whom he sent into the world to live a perfect life and to die as a perfect sacrifice for those sins and that he rose again on the third day in victory over sin and death, and you believe God’s promise that all who trust in Christ will be saved. That truth, if it lives in you, if you have believed it and submitted yourself to it, makes you a blood brother and a blood sister with every fellow believer in this room and in this county and in this state, in this country, and in this world.

People rush to things that give them identity and a common cause. We proudly wave our flags and wear out team colors. But those things are nothing compared to the truth,

love, and joy that bind the church together in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church was never meant to stand on anything less than that, not language, not culture, not race, not social standing, not age, not common interest, or common political cause, it stands unified in the truth of Christ, bound together by the love of Christ, and experiencing the joy of Christ.

John Stott expresses this relationship of the church well when he writes, “We do not love each other because we are temperamentally compatible, or because we are naturally drawn to one another, but because of the truth which we share. Not only that we have come to know it objectively; but it abides within us as a present indwelling force, and with us it will remain forever.”

Stott captures a really important detail about the language that the Apostle John uses here. John speaks of the truth as if it has some sort of agency. The love and joy that accompany the fellowship of the church in the truth of Christ is something that comes about because the truth of Christ is being activated upon us through the power of God. This is something that God does, and that’s what makes all of this happen, that’s what makes all of this certain. I love how John talks about this in v. 2-3, so we love one another in truth, because of the activity of the truth that is at work in us, which John says, abides or lives in us and will be with us forever, and the reason that this truth will be with us forever is, v. 3, “Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son.’

The reason I believe that the church will stand against every foe and every division, until the day when Jesus Christ returns is because the Bible says that God is the one actively at work to raise sinners from the dead and to make them walk in the truth with love, filling us with the eternal joy of a right relationship with him. There’s no maybe here...John says that these things WILL BE WITH US FOREVER. God is more powerful than the divisions that threaten to infiltrate the church. Upon the rock of Christ, He has established his church, and that will never, ever fail. The agency of God’s truth in God’s people does not remove the responsibility for action and obedience from us. We’ll see that in a second. But I think this gives us confidence to know that God will prevail.

There are many things in life that can bring us happiness, but the joy that John is speaking of here is something supernatural. You can go to any nation in the world, far from anything that is familiar to you, but you will always find this joy of fellowship when you find one who has come to embrace the truth of Christ, in whom the truth of Christ is living. This joy is a present and permanent reality because it is the work of God the Father, through his Son, Jesus Christ, equipped by the power of the Holy Spirit.

B) The Command of Truth and Love

We have God given duty to pursue this joy, a joy that only shines forth as long as we are abiding in the truth in love towards one another. Not everyone experiences this joy because not everyone abides in the truth of the gospel and not

everyone loves in truth. Having considered in our first point how truth and love produce joy and how the knowledge of the truth and the acts of love which accompany that knowledge are dependent and ensured by God working in us, we must also see that we have a responsibility to respond with our own activity. The right response to the truth abiding in us in love is to abide in the truth and to live out the love that we have come to know through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

There's an urgency of action in this letter. Look at v. 4, John says, "I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another."

'Walking in the truth' is John's way of talking about how a person believes the truth of the gospel and lives out the gospel by obeying God's commands. Walking in the truth is understanding and believing that Jesus Christ died for our sin, and it's acting on that objective work by abandoning our former life of sin and living for him.

Christians always need to be reminded to remain in the truth and to love one another. We need to be reminded of this because we're still in a process of being transformed, of dying to ourselves and living to Christ. John rejoiced greatly when he saw how these members of this sister church were walking in the truth, living out the truth of the gospel, but truth without love falls short of God's plan for us.

John Stott again, astutely observes that John is indicating here how, "Christian fellowship should be marked equally by love and truth, and we are to avoid the dangerous tendency to extremism, pursuing either at the expense of the other." He goes on to say, "Our love grows soft if it is not strengthened by truth, and our truth grows hard if it is not softened by love. We need to live according to Scripture which commands us both to love each other in the truth and to hold the truth in love."

When we abide in truth and the truth of the gospel abides in us, it will produce love in us, which is the necessary component for God-pleasing obedience. In the Gospel of Mark we read that when Jesus was asked what the greatest command was, he responded by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And the second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" In Romans 13:8, Paul writes, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'you shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet, and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

It is true that obedience that is pleasing to God is impossible apart from faith in God and love of God. It is also true that is impossible for us to say that we love God if we do not do his commands, which is what we see here in v. 6, "And

this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.”

In our first point, we saw that God is the one who makes the truth abide in a person. It's God who ensures that the truth abiding in a person will produce the fruit of love and joy in that person. John shows us that we have a responsibility in light of the way God has revealed his salvation in Christ. We have a responsibility to live out of the truth that is living in us, and we do that by believing in Jesus and loving one another.

John says that he is not giving the church a new commandment here. I expect that is partially because the command to love is a command that goes all the way back to Moses and the law, but I also expect that he says this is not a new commandment because this church had heard this command from the time when they had first believed until when they had received this letter from John. John taught them what he had received from Jesus, which he recorded in John 13. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have loved for one another.”

John expands this out in 1 John 5:1-5, where we read this, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his

commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” You cannot divorce love from truth. You cannot divorce love from obedience to God's commands. You cannot divorce love for God from love for God's people.

Brothers and sisters, as I look out on the landscape of the church in America, in many cases, I'm devastated. Cracks of division are appearing. We're at each other's throats over issues of conscience. I'm afraid that we may have forgotten Christ's call to love each other in truth. John shows us how truth and love are to be balanced in the life of a Christian, and yet you've got people in the church on either side of the aisle, divided and dismissive.

Friend take a look at your heart. You cannot say you're of the truth if you do not love your brother, and you cannot say that you love your brother if you've condemned them as an unbeliever because they don't share your viewpoint. 1 Corinthians 13:4 says, “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Let us measure ourselves: have we been patient and kind towards others this week? Have we boasted in our wisdom? Were we envious this week of what others had? Did we insist, even today, in our own hearts to have our way? Are we irritable towards those who disagree with us? Are we resentful of those who do not take the precautions we would like them to? Did we rejoice this week when people we dislike

were mistreated, or secretly rejoice in wrongdoing? Are we rejoicing this morning in the truth, or have we let our minds wander to other things, things not worthy of our joy and attention? Have we borne one another's burdens this week? Have we believed the truth? Have we hoped? Have we endured?

Brothers and sisters, I think we've got some repentance to do. I have an affection for this church, and I want this church to endure, but it will not endure if we abandon truth and love. I have prayed earnestly this week that God would work in our congregation to bind us in the joy that comes from truth and love. I continue to pray that in the days ahead those who see us would be able to rejoice because they see us walking in the truth and they see how we love one another out of the overflow of Christ's love working in us. We're in a war here. We're under assault here from many angles, and the only way we're going to stand is if we stand united in the truth and in love.

C) The Defense of Truth and Love

We really get to the point of John's concern for the church in v. 7. The reason that John reminds us about the command we have in Christ to love one another and to remain steadfast in the truth is, v. 7, "For/because, 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." John's concern for the church is that we avoid becoming victims of the deception of the spirit of the antichrist, which is the spirit of Satan. He is concerned, v. 8 that if the members of this church do not keep a careful watch

on themselves, if they let their guard down, they will be led astray into this deception.

John's concern for this sister church is a concern we should have for ourselves. Remember some of what we talked about here at the beginning. John has a very flexible view of what it means to be living in these last days. We're living in them now, and the risk of falling prey to deception is a real now as it was then.

The deception that John has in mind has broadly to do with being led astray from the teachings of Christ and specifically to do with the incarnation of Jesus. John says that these deceivers who had gone out into the world did not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. One of the early heresies that sprung up in 1st Century that the church had to deal with was a view that said that Jesus had come in a form, like flesh, but that he was not really human. These false teachers had no problem affirming the divinity of Jesus, but they had a problem with saying he was really human. John says that they are deceivers and that they are antichrist.

Besides dealing with the deception at hand, John anticipates future deceptions that will come upon the church. In v. 9, he says, "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." John's warning is similar to the one Jesus gave in Mark 13:22-23, where he warns us to be on guard, for many false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible the elect."

There's a crucial connection between v. 6 and v. 7, and it's that little, three letter word, "for." The reason John wrote this brief letter to the church and the reason this letter is so important for us today is because they're instructive to us as a local church for how we can stand against deception in these last days. According to John, the way the church must fight against deception is to be bound together in the truth in love towards one another. Truth and love give birth to joy, and joy in the treasury of Jesus and in the truth being worked out in others is what will defend us from the lie that we would be happier if we just gave into the deception that has come on the world we live in.

This isn't a joy that John just hoped would come about. It was a joy that he experienced for himself, after all, he tells this sister church how his heart rejoiced, greatly when he saw how these other believers were walking in the truth of Christ, how they were standing against the devil's lies and living in love. John Piper puts it like this, "He rejoiced over what he experienced in the lives of other Christians. In other words, living together in love, even if surrounded by antichrists, is a happy way to live. Loving and being loved in the truth of the gospel is deeply satisfying life. Such a happy community will not be easily deceived by the thin pleasures of sin."

This is how love rejoices in the truth, and this is how love and truth protect the church from deception. In v. 10, John warns his fellow believers to watch themselves and to be careful to make sure that they did not become apart of the ministry of these false teachers. It might seem that v. 10

contradicts John's call to love, but that's really not the case. In the ancient world, there weren't hotels like we think of today. The ones that did exist were known for hosting immoral activities and believers who were traveling commonly relied on the hospitality of other believers they encountered. It may be that the false teachers that John had in mind were taking advantage of this hospitality, and so they were pillaging these believers and using their kindness as a means to further distribute their deception. Love always seeks discernment because it rejoices in the truth.

That relationship between love and truth is important. In v. 9, John says that the thing that distinguishes someone who has God from someone who does not is whether or not they abide/dwell/live in the teaching of Christ. Our lives are to hang on the hook of Christ and his teaching, and we must carefully watch ourselves and those around us to make sure that we are abiding in that truth. It is not loving to allow apostasy to progress in the church because love is directly linked to the truth of the gospel. Love is like the mortar between the bricks of sound doctrine, binding the structure of the church together as it rises up in joy together. Remove the bricks and you will have nothing to bind together. Remove the mortar and the structure will become divided and brittle.

I want to end this evening with two brief charges to you all:

- 1) I beg you all resolve this morning that whatever the future holds for us, that you will fight for unity in the truth in love for one another. Armies die when soldiers break ranks and fend for

themselves. Armies win when soldiers stand, united in a common cause, resolved to fight for the person who stands beside them, even if it means sacrifice and suffering. We've only just seen the beginning of conflict in these last days. We cannot afford to break ranks now, or ever.

2) Let us ask God to give us a perspective of what he is doing so that we rejoice in what he is doing in his church across the world.

We should never get over the glory of how God is working in churches around us. I love how John's joy is driven by the faithfulness of another church. I'm sure that he had many wonderful things to say about the church where he was when he wrote this, but his joy wasn't limited to that congregation. He rejoiced to see God's grace, mercy, and peace at work in others. He rejoiced in it so much that he had to write a letter about it, even though he was planning to come and see the rest of this church anyway.

I love how John ends this letter with one last word of joy and fellowship, "The children of your elect sister greet you." Whether you are from GCC or GBC or any number of other churches in this community, know that we need to pursue joy in love believing the truth and encouraging each other in the grace, mercy, and peace that we have received from God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son. One of the ways that I think we add to our own joy is by rejoicing when we see other congregations and other believers, near or far, walking in the truth in love. The local church has an important role to play as an embassy of God's Kingdom here on earth. We can rejoice in

the victories of other faithful churches, because we serve the same King and we exist for his glory. The spirit of rivalry has no place in the church and it has no place in churches across the globe as we faithfully witness of to the truth and love of Christ.

So, pray for our church, as I pray for you, that we would walk in unity together in the truth and in love. Pray that the churches in our community would do the same. Pray for our missionary partners. Pray that their churches would be built up in the truth and that their congregations would love one another. Pray that God would give you joy in the knowledge that Jesus is being exalted in the lives of his people all around the world.

Truth and Love are the guardians of the local church. May God fill our hearts with joy as we delight in the truth and in the love of Christ. May he give us courage to cling to the truth no matter the cost. And may he give us the strength to obey the command to love each other in truth.