

2 John 1-3 Truth and Love

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We're starting a new little sermon series today.
We're going to spend three weeks looking at the second letter of John.
I had promised you Rhys for reformation Sunday next week.
But that was going to be a video
that Rhys was doing for a group of churches.
But for our first Sunday in months
when we are allowed lots of people in the church,
I'm not going to make you watch a video on the screen.
It's time to celebrate seeing people in the flesh!
God made us with bodies.
We're wired up to like face to face contact.
So we're going to do that when we can.
So 2 John.
It's the shortest letter in the New Testament.
I've never preached on it before.
I doubt you've read it recently.
But it has some really important messages for the 21C.
But before we get to the message,
let's look at the background to help us understand what we are reading.
This is a letter from the apostle John.
That is John the brother of James.
Those were the two guys
who were asking Jesus for the places of glory at his right and his left
in the passage Bishop Paul preached to us last week.
You wouldn't necessarily think from reading that passage
that John would have wise instruction for God's church.
But this letter was written 50 years after that.
John has been filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.
And he's had many years of leading God's church to give him wisdom.
And so he's putting pen to paper
to help the church face the challenges that it meets in following Jesus.
We don't know exactly who John is writing to.

He addresses the letter "to the lady chosen by God and to her children". It could be that he's writing the letter to a lady whose name we don't know and her family. But there are some things about the letter that make me think it could be another possibility. It's possible that the lady is a metaphor for a church - and her children are a metaphor for the members of that church. Why is that an attractive possibility? Well it kind of fits how the NT works. We live in a very individualistic age. We want everything to speak to me and my life. But when God sent the apostles round to spread the good news of Jesus, he didn't send them to take individuals and tell them to put their trust in Jesus for their personal salvation. He sent them to plant churches. And when the apostles wrote letters, most of them were written to churches about the issues that churches faced in their lives together. And those that were written to individuals like Timothy and Titus, were not written to instruct them in their personal spirituality. They were written to instruct them in how to lead God's church. The NT is instruction for the church before it is instruction for individuals. Well that's a general point. Here are two specific points. Firstly, the idea that a lady might be a metaphor for a church is made more probable by the fact that the apostle Peter in his first letter does exactly that. 1 Pet 5:13 "She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends her greetings." It's generally understood that Peter is referring to the church in Rome by the phrase "She who is in Babylon". Secondly, verse 5 of this letter makes a whole lot more sense if John is writing to a church. 1:5 "And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command

but one that we have had from the beginning.
I ask that we love one another."
If John were writing to an individual,
then it would be almost inferring
that they'd had a falling out in their relationship
and they needed to patch things up and get back to loving each other.
But there's no sense of a strained relationship in the rest of the letter.
Far better I think to see John commanding a church to love one another.
Anyone who's ever been part of a church
knows that we need to be constantly reminded to love each other.
The church is the outpost of heaven on earth.
Our relationships are meant to give the world
a picture of what the future of God's people looks like.
We know it will never be a perfect picture.
But it should be good enough
to be a genuine sign of what God is doing in the world.
And so the evil one will try to tempt us to fight and dislike,
to hate and to ignore.
Anything except loving one another
and giving the world a sign that God is at work amongst us.
That's why John is writing to the church to love one another.
And that is why I'm pretty sure that the lady chosen by God is a church.

So John, the brother of James, the son of Zebedee,
the author of John's gospel is writing a letter to a church.
What's the letter about?
Well there is a twin theme: truth and love.
You can tell by the opening verses of the letter,
that this is what he has on his mind.
"To the lady chosen by God and to her children,
whom I love in the truth"
there is it, to start the letter off, "love in the truth".
And it's there again at the end of his introduction.
"Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father
and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son,

will be with us in love and truth."

Now I doubt that many people today would pair love and truth together.

Love is what someone is looking for on "The Bachelor" or "MAFS".

Truth is what the investigators are looking for on a crime show.

They seem to inhabit different genres.

How can we pair together "love and truth"?

And what does it mean to say John loves the church in the truth?

I love you in the truth?

I could imagine someone saying "I truly love you"

or "It's true that I love you"

but that doesn't seem to be what he means when he says

"He loves them in the truth".

The truth that John is talking about is the truth of the gospel.

It's an objective truth.

Jesus really was born of Mary.

He really taught the things written down in the gospels,

including the gospel that John himself wrote.

He really died on the cross.

That death was really to pay the penalty for sin.

He really rose again.

And he's really coming back to judge the world.

That's the truth.

It's not something that can be true for me and not true for you.

This truth is not a matter of intuition.

You know sometimes people today say,

"That doesn't feel true to me."

As if their intuitive sense of what might be the case

is the arbiter of truth.

This truth is objective.

It happened in history.

It's true whether you like it or not.

This truth is defined.

Sometimes people will make vague truth claims.

"Ash Barty is my hero and I think she's just the best."

Well it's a truth claim.

But it's not nearly as well defined a truth claim as,
 "Ash Barty was first ranked number 1 in the world on 24 June 2019
 and she has been number 1 the entire time since 9 Sept 2019."

This truth that John is talking about is defined.

That's why we have creeds that lay out the truth.

It's objective. It's defined.

This truth is also absolute.

Some things can be objective and defined but not be all that important.

Kate Middleton wore a gold sequined gown by Jenny Packham
 to the premier of the latest James Bond film "No Time to Die".

It's objective. It's well defined.

But unless you are super into fashion or royal watching,
 it really doesn't matter much.

But this truth at John is talking about is absolute truth.

This is how he put it in his gospel.

Jn 14:6 "Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me.'"

Did you catch that last sentence.

No one comes to the Father except through me.

This is not just any old piece of truth.

This is truth that affects the eternal destiny
 of every single human being on the planet.

It's absolute truth.

And that of course is the greatest heresy in today's world.

If you believe that, you are a fundamentalist.

This is the common sentiment today.

"How could you dare to say

that God will judge people on the basis of how they respond to Jesus?

Surely if you believe in God at all,

he will judge people based on whether they've been sincere
 in following whatever spirituality seemed right to them."

Well if you think you can stand before God

and tell him that the death of his Son on the cross

was not as important as he thinks it was,

well go right ahead.
But I don't think it's going to turn out well for you.

OK, we've explored truth.

John says he loves them in the truth.

What can we say about his love?

Well quite a lot actually.

Love is a very broad word in English.

I can love playing chess,

I can love my wife,

I can love Australia,

I can love my brother Marcus.

They actually mean quite different things.

I'm sure Cherida would be very upset
if I thought about her like a chess board.

I'm sure Marcus would be quite creeped out,
if I thought about him like I think about Cherida.

In Greek there are actually separate words for different types of love.
There are four but I'll only mention three.

There's eros.

That's where we get our word erotic from.

No prizes for guessing what kind of love is in view here.

There's phileo.

That's brotherly love.

That's my love for my brother, Marcus.

And there's agape.

This was a word for love that Christians made up
because there was no word that adequately described
the love of Jesus on the cross.

Agape is the love of self sacrifice.

It's the love that puts the other person first irrespective of their response.
And this is the word for love that John uses
when he says he loves them in the truth.

He loves them with the self sacrificing love of Jesus,
in the truth of the gospel about the self sacrificing love of Jesus.

The self sacrificing love of Jesus creates the community that lives out his self sacrificing love.

He loves them in the truth.

Now there may be members of the community that John wouldn't normally have become friends with.

There might be members of our church who drive you up the wall.

The minister of your church might drive you up the wall.

But we don't love one another in our compatible personalities.

We love one another in the truth.

We have been called into a community of those ransomed and restored by the sacrificial love of Jesus.

And so we love one another

with the same sacrificial love that Jesus loved.

And it's not dependent on whether we click with each other or whether we have shared interests.

We love one another because Christ loved us and called us into his church.

We love in the truth.

What does it mean practically to love in the truth?

In our world, love is often a matter of mere emotion.

In our world, truth is often a matter of mere intuition.

Love devoid of the truth turns into mushy sentimentality.

Truth devoid of love turns into something cold and austere.

I had a call from a lovely sounding young woman a couple of weeks ago.

She explained to me that her organisation is setting up a prayer meeting to pray for peace and recovery of the world from the covid pandemic.

She was inviting church leaders from all over Melbourne to come and be part of the prayer meeting.

It sounded like an invitation to model church unity and come before God humbly asking for his intervention in the most pressing problems facing our world.

I asked the young woman what organisation she was representing.

She told me, "The Shincheonji church of Jesus".
 If I had said yes to her invitation, it would have been love without truth.
 Shincheonji is a cult.
 It began in South Korea in 1984.
 It claims that its founder Lee Man He
 is the second coming of Jesus Christ.
 It claims that only members of Shincheonji
 will be saved on the day of the final judgement.
 You can't faithfully go along to a prayer meeting organised by a cult
 because your presence there gives them credibility.
 It says that you regard them as faithful brothers and sisters in Christ,
 whereas the reality is that anyone who gets caught up in that cult
 is headed on the pathway to eternal condemnation.
 You aren't loving people in the truth
 if you send them the wrong signal about something so dangerous.
 So I told the young lady that I wouldn't be attending the prayer meeting,
 and I urged her to leave the cult that she has gotten caught up in.
 Obviously that conversation didn't last too long.

Love in the truth demands that the gospel controls how we express love.
 It's sentimentality if we give someone warm fuzzies
 about a road that will lead to their destruction
 simply because we can't handle having a difficult conversation.

I think for most of us,
 it wouldn't take too much in the way of self reflection
 to discern whether we lean in the love direction or the truth direction.
 If you just ask yourself the question,
 "Am I more likely to fall into the trap of sentimentality
 or of being cold and austere?"
 the answer will probably spring out at you.
 Christians are called to truth and love,
 to love in the truth.
 But for most of us we incline to valuing one higher than another.
 Another diagnostic question is this,

"When I get upset at the way another person is behaving, is it more likely to be because they are failing at being loving, or not placing a high enough value on the truth of the gospel?"
 If people failing at being loving offends you most, you probably lean in the love direction, and you need to reflect on the importance of the truth.
 If bad doctrine irks you the most, you probably lean in the truth direction, and you need to reflect on the importance of the sacrificial love of Jesus for those who were his enemies.
 I know what it is for me.
 I lean in the truth direction.
 I need to reflect on the love of Jesus.
 I wonder what it is for you?

Well John finishes our passage today with the promise of three gifts that are ours in truth and love.

1:3 "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love."

Grace, mercy and peace.

Grace is God giving us what don't deserve.

We don't deserve the glories of heaven.

We don't deserve to be adopted as God's children.

We don't deserve the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We don't deserve the forgiveness of our sins.

But by God's grace, that is what we are given.

If Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve,

then mercy is God not giving us what we do deserve.

The Scriptures tell us that the wages of sin is death.

Many people rebel against that message.

If you want to argue with God

and tell him what an appropriate response is

to offending against his holiness,

well feel free.

But my strong recommendation is that you arguing with God has less chance of a successful result than a toddler arguing with its father.

The wages of sin is death.

But in God's mercy he doesn't give us what we deserve.

Even when we face death,

which a couple of members of our congregation have done this week, it's a temporary matter.

Our spirits are alive in Christ

and when Jesus returns our bodies will be resurrected,

the final result will be better than any of us could imagine.

God is merciful.

He doesn't give us what we deserve.

Grace, mercy and peace.

Peace is the blessing that flows from grace and mercy.

When we know God's grace and mercy towards us,

our hearts are set at rest.

The things that would otherwise have weighed heavily upon us are light and momentary troubles.

2 Cor 4:17 "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

May we rest secure in the Grace, mercy and peace of God.