

Good morning, Moon Valley!

Tucked away in the closing pages of the New Testament are two short notes of encouragement that are easily overlooked and rarely studied: 2 and 3 John. These are the two shortest books in the entire Bible. And they are addressed to obscure recipients.

You may have never read 2 and 3 John. And even if you have, you may have thought to yourself, “That’s nice,” and moved on to something else.

So, how can these little letters be an encouragement to you and me today? That’s precisely what we are going to discover in this new sermon mini-series titled, ☐ “Notes of Encouragement.”

In my sermon for today, we’re going to cover all of ☐ 2 John, which is only 13 verses long.

It is common in citing verses from 2 John to leave off the chapter number because there is, after all, only one chapter. As you can see, I am going to buck convention and list the chapter number anyway because citing biblical verses without a chapter number is so rare some might suspect I have made a typo.

By its shortness, we may be tempted to conclude that this letter isn’t all that important. But the penultimate verse suggests just the opposite. In ☐ verse 12, the apostle John writes,

ESV 2 John 1:12 Though I have much to write to you, I would 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.

John has a lot he would like to say to the recipients of this short letter, but he is going to save most of it for a later visit when he can personally convey it face to face. This suggests that what John *has* written here in this letter is the stuff that is so urgent it can't wait. So, in this instance, the brevity of the letter actually makes the case for its importance.

Let's go back and work our way through the text to see what's so important.

John begins by addressing the recipients of his letter in □ verse 1:

ESV 2 John 1:1 The elder to the elect lady and her children, . . .

John refers to himself as “the elder.” This may be a designation for a church leader, but it is more likely used here as a term of paternal endearment, something like the modern, “this is your old man.”

The recipients are identified as “the elect lady and her children.” Most modern scholars take this metaphorically, with the “elect lady” being a church and “her children” being the individual church members.

It is no stretch to interpret it this way. In the Old Testament, the cities or people of Israel are often referred to with female personifications such as “the daughter of Zion,” or “the daughter of Judah.”

Also, over in the New Testament, the Church is called the “bride of Christ.” And Paul refers to the church in Corinth as a “pure virgin” betrothed to her husband, Christ.¹

So, “the elect lady” is probably a church, and “her children” are the believers within it.

¹ Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love*, 251.

This interpretation also comports well with John's sign off in □ verse 13, where he says,

ESV 2 John 1:13 The children of your elect sister greet you.

The "elect sister" is likely a sister church, probably the church from which John is writing. The "children" are the people within the sister church who extend their greetings through John.

We don't know the specific church to which John is writing, but given the colloquial terms of endearment, it seems clear that they are on very familiar terms.

In □ verses 1 and 2, John goes on to describe this church as the one . . .

ESV 2 John 1:1 . . . whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth, 2 because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:

This sounds awkward to modern ears. Right off, we can see there's □ some love and a whole lot of truth going on because truth is mentioned three times. But at a glance it is hard to make out the relationship between love and truth.

It certainly would be helpful to figure out what John is saying about love and truth because one of the hardest things for me to do in the Christian life is to balance love and truth in relationships. It's like walking a tightrope.

On the left is love. It's the soft side of relationships, characterized by grace, forgiveness, patience, acceptance.

On the right is truth. It's the hard side of relationships, including instruction, confrontation, correction, and discipline.

And in the middle, it's messy. We struggle to balance on the tightrope in all kinds of relationships: in parenting, friendships, marriage, the workplace, and church.

Most of us are predisposed to lean one way or another. Here's a shocker: I am predisposed to truth.

I think kids figure out the predisposition of their respective parents early on and approach them accordingly. My kids learned that if you want money, don't go to dad. If you want mercy, don't go to dad. But if you want help with your homework or your bike, go to dad.

Balancing both truth and love as Jesus did is difficult. It is far easier to give up the struggle and just land on one side or the other—on whichever side of the tightrope we feel most comfortable.

Churches do this. Some churches have a lot of truth, but not much love. Other churches seem to have a lot of love, but not much truth. And churches committed to both truth and love are often misunderstood because they are so rare and sometimes messy.

Our American culture leans strongly toward love at the expense of truth. Truth takes a back seat as something that is purely relative and situational and governed by individual feelings.

But both love and truth are needful.

When we lean too far toward love at the expense of truth we can fall into permissiveness and enabling and heresy. This tends to produce people who are spoiled or entitled or ill-equipped or deluded.

When we lean too far toward truth at the expense of love we can fall into legalism, self-righteousness, and judgmentalism. This tends to produce people who are unloving or inauthentic or arrogant or moral gestapos.

I want to show you that, in this little letter, John gives us some helpful direction concerning the relationship between love and truth. It doesn't tell us everything we might want to know, but it does tell us one thing we need to know.

Here's the big idea I draw from the text: □ Real love does not rejoice in what is untrue.

I use the word "rejoice" because that is a word John is going to use. It means that real love does not enable or encourage or celebrate what is untrue.

We can flip this idea around and also say that real love rejoices in what is true. Real love enables, encourages, and celebrates what is true.

An important part of this idea is that real love and truth cannot be separated; they go together. Real love cannot operate outside of the truth. When real love moves beyond the boundaries of truth, it becomes something less than real love. It may be sentimentality or a popular feeling or a trendy virtue signal or some do-gooder charity. But outside the boundaries of truth, it is not real love.

Let's work our way through the text to flesh out this idea.

Back in □ verse 1, the word "love" is a translation of the Greek verb, ἀγαπάω. You may have heard of the noun form of the word, ἀγάπη (*agape*). It describes a god-like love that sacrificially serves the best

interests of others. It is a love embodied by Christ himself, who shows us what this love looks like. This is real love.

In verse 1, John says, “I love in truth.” I take □ “in truth” to mean in the sphere of truth.² This suggests that the love John has—*agape* love, real love—operates within the boundaries of truth.

But John isn’t the only one who loves in truth. According to verse 1, so does everyone who knows the truth. John says, □ “and not only I, but also all who know the truth. The original Greek word translated “know” is in the perfect tense. In this case, it describes people who have come to know the truth at some point in the past and who continue to live in that truth in the present.

Living in this truth fuels real love. In □ verse 2, John says real love is possible, “because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever.”

At this point, you are probably beginning to wonder, “What is this truth?” In □ verse 3, John begins to reveal it, saying,

ESV 2 John 1:3 Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son, in truth and love.

Where do we learn the truth about God’s grace, mercy, and peace? We learn the truth through what God has revealed to us in his word and through his Son. Our knowledge of what is true comes □ “from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son.” The Lord determines what is true. Through his word and his Son we learn the truth about the big questions of life: Who am I? Who made me? Why am I here? Where

² Locative of sphere, Brooks and Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek*, 40.

do I belong? To whom am I accountable? Who is my highest authority for what is right and what to believe and how to live?

The popular notion that I myself create my own answers to these questions and then call them “my truth” is a delusion. There is only God’s truth. And anything that contradicts God’s word is simply untrue.

And notice the sphere in which God the Father and Jesus the Son operate: □ “in truth and love.”

As believers in Jesus, we too should operate in truth and love. Both truth *and* love. Together. Inseparable.

John gives us a glimpse of what that looks like in □ verse 4 when he says,

ESV 2 John 1:4 I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father.

There’s our word, □ “rejoice.” I told you John was going to use it. And this won’t be the last time.

John rejoices because some of the believers in the church are □ “walking in the truth.” That is to say they are living according to truth of God’s word.

In the last part of verse 4, I’m afraid something gets lost in translation. It’s not a huge deal—nothing that materially undermines the reliability of the English translation I’m using.

I am talking about the part that says, □ “just as we were commanded by the Father.” A more literal translation of verse 4 could be rendered, □ “I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in truth, just as

we received a commandment from the Father.” A number of English translations render this way.³

This more literal translation seems a little awkward and leaves us wondering, “What commandment? What specific commandment did we receive from the Father, and how does it relate to walking in the truth?”

John answers the question in □ verse 5.

ESV 2 John 1:5 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. [emphasis mine]

Verse 5 makes clear that John has in mind the commandment he himself recorded from the lips of Jesus in the gospel of □ John 13:34, where Jesus says from the beginning of the Christian era,

ESV John 13:34 “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.”

So, John links “walking in the truth” in verse 4 to “love one another” in verse 5—the new commandment of Jesus. They go hand in hand. John rejoices that some of his fellow believers are loving one another in truth, just as Jesus commanded and just as he modeled.

Then John defines real love for us in the first part of □ verse 6, when he says,

³ E.g., NKJV, KJV, CSB17.

ESV 2 John 1:6 And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; . . .

Real love operates within the sphere of truth. Real love walks according to God's commandments.

In the last part of □ verse 6, John returns to the specific commandment he has in mind. He says,

ESV 2 John 1:6 . . . this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.

The commandment they had heard from the beginning is from Jesus: "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."

We should love as Christ loves, in truth.

At this point, you may be wondering, "Why is John pounding this love in truth thing?"

In □ verse 7, John gives the reason.

ESV 2 John 1:7 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.

There are deceivers and antichrists in this world. And at the heart of their deception is the uncoupling of truth from love. "Let's just love one another without regard to what is true. Who's to say what is true anyway? My truth may not be your truth."

But that's not real love. Love uncoupled from truth is a delusional love promoted by deceivers.

John gives an example of deceivers. They include □ “those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.” This is a flat denial of what God has revealed to be true about Jesus in Scripture: Jesus, God in the flesh died and rose again and will one day return to judge the world, to set things right, to establish his kingdom of righteousness and justice in truth and love.

Deceivers do not flatly deny the need for love. That would not be deceptive. Instead, they deny love's relationship to truth. And such denials usually diminish the person and work of Christ in some way. A deceiver today might say something like, “The claim that Jesus is the only way is narrow-minded and hateful. In order to love people you must affirm and celebrate whatever they believe to be their truth.”

But this is not real love. Real love does not rejoice in what is untrue.

Say you have a friend who is self-harming and she tells you that cutting herself is the only thing that seems to bring her relief from emotional pain. Real love extends compassion and empathy and lovingly seeks the best interests of the friend with the gentleness of Christ. But real love does not say, “Well, I am supportive of whatever you think is good and true for you. Can I get you some more razor blades?”

Real love does not rejoice in what is untrue. Real love serves the best interests of others within the sphere of truth God has given. We ourselves are not the arbiters of what is true. God is the authority.

In □ verse 8, John issues a warning to Christians tempted to step outside the truth to try to love in a more culturally acceptable way that enables, encourages, or celebrates what is untrue. He says,

ESV 2 John 1:8 Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.

It might seem as though John is threatening believers with the loss of eternal salvation. Indeed, some scholars interpret it that way.⁴

But nothing could be further from the truth. Eternal salvation is not something “we have worked for.” Neither is eternal salvation a “reward.” It is a free gift received through faith alone in Christ alone apart from works. Works are not required to earn, keep, or prove our eternal salvation.

Therefore, John is not warning professing believers against the possible loss of eternal salvation; he is warning against the possible loss of reward in heaven.

All born-again, heaven-bound believers will one day appear before the judgment seat of Christ where we will experience the gain or loss of reward based on what we have done as Christians. John is warning believers against the loss of reward.

The warning continues in □ verse 9.

ESV 2 John 1:9 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.

⁴ E.g., Kruse, Colin G., *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2000), 211-212.

John is saying that if I, as a born-again Christian, forsake the truth God has revealed in his word, if I do not abide in the teaching of Christ, if I do not walk in truth, then I do not have God.

John is not saying I am unsaved. He is saying I have walked away from God. For me to try to love others while forsaking the truth is to walk away from God and the rewards he has for me. If I divorce truth from love, I am not following God because God operates in truth *and* love.

Real love does not rejoice in what is untrue.

In verse 10 and 11, John applies this idea to a hypothetical situation.

ESV 2 John 1:10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, 11 for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

At first blush, this may sound harsh and judgmental. It may sound like a justification for being a Jesus jerk, and the world already has way too many of those.

But let's look more closely.

It is important to keep in mind the historical context. In the Greco-Roman world of John's day, it was common for traveling teachers or philosophers to make a living going from place to place to recruit students who would pay for their instruction.

Likewise, in the Christian church, traveling evangelists, like the apostle Paul for example, would go from place to place to teach. As an act of love, believers in the ancient church were to welcome them into their homes and to support them financially as needed. Such hospitality was a specific application of the command to love one another.

But John is saying here that such love must not rejoice in what is untrue. If the teachings of any so-called evangelist do not conform to the teachings of Christ, no help is to be offered. In fact, John says don't even greet them.

This may sound snooty and self-righteous. Until you look more closely.

The words, "greeting" and "greet" both come from the same Greek word, χαίρω. It means to rejoice. In fact, John used the very same word back in verse 4 when he said, "I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth."

I told you John was going to use that word again.

So, here in verses 10 and 11, John is not talking about rudely and sanctimoniously withholding basic cordiality or perfunctory salutations. It's okay to say hello to a heretic. Just don't enable, encourage, or celebrate his falsehood.

John is simply applying the big idea: Real love does not rejoice in what is untrue.

John is not giving us a license to be a jerk.

Unless, of course, you think Jesus was a jerk.

You have probably heard of the famous biblical account of the woman caught in adultery in John 8. Some self-righteous religious leaders brought to Jesus an adulterous woman saying that, in accordance with the law, the woman ought to be stoned to death.

But Jesus comes alongside the adulterous woman and graciously defends her against her pious abusers. Jesus stands against arrogance and hypocrisy and bigotry and hate. Jesus is the Savior of broken people like the woman. And we're all broken. We are no better than anyone else.

When the sanctimonious abusers had gone, Jesus loves the woman in truth. He has her best interests at heart.

You know the story.

Then Jesus says to the woman, "Don't worry about the adultery. You do whatever makes you happy. Girl, you do what's true for you."

No, that's not what Jesus says. Because real love does not rejoice in what is untrue.

Instead, Jesus says to the woman, "from now on sin no more." And he says this out of love because the truth is: It is in the best interests of this woman to stop cheating on her husband.

Jesus loves in truth.

And this is why, if Jesus were to walk around in our culture today, he would be misunderstood by many, including professing believers.

Those predisposed to truth at the expense of love might say, "He's a bleeding heart liberal who coddles sinners."

Those predisposed to love at the expense of truth might say, "He's kind of harsh and judgy with the 'sin no more' thing."

Jesus is in the messy middle, operating in full-on truth and full-on love. And real love does not rejoice in what is untrue.

Let's pray.

Lord, thank you that you love us in truth such that our best interests are truly served. Help us to love others as Jesus did, in a humble, gracious, gentle way, without rejoicing in what is untrue. Amen.

Today we have an opportunity to celebrate the real love Jesus has extended to us.

It is not a love that says our sin is no big deal.
It is a love that is willing to die in payment for our sin that we may have new life.

It is not a love that says all roads lead to God.
It is a love that says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

It is not a love that says it doesn't matter what you believe.
It is a love that says, "unless you believe in me you will die in your sins."

By his death and resurrection in payment for our sins, Jesus offers us the free gift of eternal life. We receive the gift through faith alone in Christ alone.

Communion commemorates the cost of new life for those who have believed in Jesus.

On the two identically prepared tables in the front, there are two elements: the bread and the cup. The bread represents Christ's body

given for us on the cross. The cup represents Christ's blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

When we take the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim our belief in the person and work of Jesus Christ who loves us in truth.

I am going to pray. Then some music will play. Any time during the music, you may come forward to partake of the elements. You may partake immediately at the table. Or you may take the elements back to your seat and partake there. It doesn't matter.

If for any reason you would like me to serve you the elements right where you are seated, that would be my privilege. Just raise your hand and I will find my way to you.

There is no pressure to participate. If you are uncomfortable, feel free to sit this one out.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for dying in our place and on our behalf that we may have new life with you. In this moment, draw us closer to you. Reset our hearts and minds that we may refocus and rest once more in your love and truth. Amen.