

2 John: Walking in Truth and Love

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Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, help us to know your ways; teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth, and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation; for you we wait all day long. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Background

2 John is a short letter by New Testament standards—but similar in length to most ancient letters of the period. Church tradition says that the Elder mentioned in the greeting is John the Elder—or The Apostle John.

What's particularly interesting is who the recipients of the letter are—the Elect Lady and her children. Many scholars have concluded that this Elect Lady is not an individual, but a code word for the church and the members of the church that the Apostle John led.

2 John mentions TRUTH 4 times in 3 verses. But like John's first epistle, you also find LOVE mentioned numerous times. So for John, truth and love must always intersect. Speak the truth in love. And love in truth.

John's flock, as was mentioned last week, was undergoing conflict and division. Not everyone was choosing to walk in the truth or walk in love. John doesn't mince words—stay clear of those who deny that the Christ was truly human. John was troubled that these deceivers and antichrists were teaching that God can't fully enter into human life. This contradicted the apostle's teaching and caused dissension in the community.

I love how centuries later Martin Luther affirmed the full humanity and divinity of Christ:

Jesus ate, drank, slept, waked, was weary, sorrowful, rejoicing, he wept and laughed, he knew hunger and thirst and sweat, he talked, he toiled, he prayed ... so that there was no difference between him and other men, save that he was God and had no sin.

So let's hear now from John's Second Epistle:

Scripture: 2 John 1:1-13 (NRSV)

Salutation

The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the 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.

Truth and Love

I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it. Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist! Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive a full reward. Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.

Final Greetings

Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

The children of your elect sister send you their greetings.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – 2 John: Walking in Truth and Love

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal with certain inalienable rights..." wrote the thirty-three year-old Thomas Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence*. Under oath, with our palm resting on a Bible we swear to tell *"the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God..."*

In the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul encourages us to put on the full armor of God and buckle up with the belt of truth, that holds the rest of the spiritual armor in place. In the Gospel according to John, Pilate famously asked Jesus, *"What is truth?"* *"For this I was born,"* replied Jesus, *"and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth."*

In fact, Jesus was the very personification of truth saying, *"I am the way, the TRUTH, and the life."* Not only that, Jesus also said, *"You will know the truth and the truth will set you free."*

Truth is vitally important to the Christian and to God—and that's the honest to God truth.

John emphasizes the importance of truth in a number of ways in his second epistle:

Love in the truth.
Know the truth.
Live in the truth.
Walk in the truth.
Speak the truth in love.

In Lois Tverberg's book *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*, she writes about the Jewish concept of walking that's found in our morning's Scripture reading. Our walk describes our whole existence, the way we treat others, in essence the way we roll in our day to day lives. I like how Pastor Michael Todd of Transformations Church puts it:

Jesus never RUNS in the gospels, he always WALKS.
A steady walk is the pace of grace.
Jesus didn't strive or run himself ragged.
It was about his walking stride, trusting, taking his time.
He didn't strive to make things happen—
He just kept walking in faith and love.

Jesus never handed his students a textbook or gave them a syllabus. Instead, he beckoned each of them to "follow me." More literally you could translate it as Aerosmith and Run DMC did back in the 80s: *Walk this way!*

Jesus invited his disciples to walk after him on a pilgrimage of faith—where side by side, Jesus traverses the highways and the byways side by side with us. The disciple would engage in life's activities alongside the rabbi, observing his responses and imitating how he lived out God's Word. The Rabbi's walk manifested God's love and truth: in his actions, in his speech, in his bearing, and in his faithfulness to the Lord.

When you walk the walk, you're putting skin on truth and love. From this idea of walking developed the well-known Jewish saying,

"may you be covered in the dust of your rabbi."

Walk so close behind your rabbi that as you travel together from town to town, the sandy granules kicked up by the rabbi would cling to your clothes. And as you walked close to your rabbi, your heart would change.

Very similar to this was the idea of following the *derekh*, which means in Hebrew the road, path, or way. But your *derekh* wasn't a paved road, rather it was the track left by people's footprints. Some paths lead to good places, others to dark and dangerous places. And so your life is the way, the path, the footprints you choose to follow. Jesus bids us to put our feet in his own footprints, to become part of his Way of Life and Truth. It's a very important choice whose footsteps you follow. Whose footprints will you walk in? When Jesus says he's the Truth, he's

saying that he's the ultimate reality. That's he's the full revelation of the living God. The gospel truth for John is that truth is wholeness, completion, and maturity in all aspects of human life.

Mighty in word and deed, Jesus has shown us what real life truth-in-action does and what truth-in-being is. So truth is ... integrity and an integrated life. There's no falsehood or deception in truth. To discover the truth, or better yet to be discovered by the truth, means that we live out of the true love God has given us. By God's grace, Christ's life spills out of our life. Truth lovingly and courageously speaks to reality—even if it's uncomfortable.

The book of Proverbs says that "an honest answer is a sign of true friendship." A true friend or loved one will at the appropriate time say, "I think you have an addiction problem," rather than just pretending everything is OK.

Living truthfully finds a way of living with others who have different convictions than us. On the one hand, we don't act judgmental towards them. And on the other hand, we don't become disloyal to the truth. With compassion and care, there's a time to speak a difficult truth in love: Don't touch the stove—it's hot! You're going the wrong way!

The Greek word that John uses for love is *agape*. *Agape* isn't about being head over heels in love. *Agape* isn't indulging or spoiling someone. *Agape* isn't sentimentality or academic theory. *Agape* doesn't seek to possess or weaken the other. *Agape* is the resolve not to be bitter and to pray for a person's well-being. Christians *agape* others. But it can't be sloppy *agape*. Our *agape* is spelled out in God's commands. *Agape* is the basis of Christian living—and it constantly needs to be recalled. Like the things mom always brought up:

Brush your teeth.

Look both ways before crossing.

Say please and thank you.

Don't take candy from strangers.

"Children," says the Apostle John, "let us love one another."

One of the best modern-day examples of a person walking in the truth and walking in love is Greg Wittkamper. A few years ago Greg Wittkamper got the most surprising letter of his life in his mailbox. It was an invitation to his high school forty-year reunion in Americus, Georgia. Up until that day, he never heard from anyone in his class. He thought they'd be too embarrassed to see him again. His classmate David Morgan wrote this note in his invitation:

I expect you will be quite surprised to hear from me. If you remember me at all, it will be for unpleasant reasons.

The message immediately took Greg Wittkamper back to his senior year of high school. It was the worst year of his life. On the first day of class, Greg rode to campus with four black students to show his support as the school became desegregated that year. A mob threw bricks and rocks at their car. Students spit on Greg, tore up his books, pushed him down the stairs, and urinated in his locker. A person smashed a sloppy joe in his face in the cafeteria. Greg got beat up by a group of students—and he stuck out his cheek to be punched again while still standing.

In one of the letters of confession, a person who witnessed Greg getting beat up said,
"Greg, I saw a sermon in you that afternoon."

Greg was booed at graduation. The yearbook staff typed this caption below Greg's senior picture: *He shows his true nature by what he does.* What made Greg so compassionate, so prophetic, so pioneering at that time of prejudice and racism? *Jesus.*

Greg Wittkamper grew up on the Koinonia Farm. This was a Christian commune where blacks and whites lived together. This was also the birthplace of Habitat for Humanity, both formed by Clarence Jordan. The farm was a target of a KKK terror plan. It was bombed and guns were shot at children playing on the farm. Peace-making isn't cheap. Being a bridge isn't easy—bridges often get walked on.

David Morgan's letter of apology continued:

Throughout the last 40 years I have thought of you. I matured and I became more ashamed, and I wish I had taken a different stance back then.

Greg ran into his house and told his wife: something wonderful is happening.

The next day he received three more letters of confession and apology from classmates. Greg had to sit down by his mailbox, and he cried—for 15 minutes straight. He eventually received 11 letters.

Most of Greg's friends and family said it was a joke—*don't go*—you're being set up. Greg prayed and phoned the classmates—and he got in his car and drove 12 hours to the 40th reunion. He joked with his wife when they arrived in Americus that they still could go back. When Greg entered the room—they hugged him, cried, and prayed together. Greg was honest about his hurts with the group.

There's still room for growth in this story. Four African-American students started at Americus High School over 40 years ago. Only one stuck it out to graduation. Greg tracked her down-- Robertina Fletcher is her name. She's a pharmacy director in Houston. He asked if she was ever invited to any of the class reunions. "No," she said sadly. "I've never been invited." We still have room for healing across racial divides and relational divides—in Americus, in America, and in the church.

The key for continued healing is, like Greg Wittkamper, to follow in the way of Jesus—walking in truth and walking in love. Then, we'll truly be known by our nature—that we're a new creation in Christ Jesus—who is The Way, The Truth, and The Life.

Amen.

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