

Walking Together in Truth and Love

2 John

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on January 5, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ The Christian life is often depicted in the Bible as a race (2 Tim. 4:7). But it's not the kind of race where you're competing with fellow runners because those running next to you are brothers and sisters in Christ. They're trying to encourage you and spur you on to finish the race. They're not trying to beat you. So it's a unique kind of race.
 - ▶ But like in any race, there are obstacles. There are still rivals on the course. They're not fellow runners, but they might appear to be. Yet their true intention is to trip you up and keep you from finishing well.

- ❖ This idea was dramatically illustrated in the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens. Brazilian marathon runner, Vanderlei de Lima, was in front holding a 30-second lead. He was about four miles away from winning Brazil's first gold medal in the marathon. When out of nowhere, a strangely dressed man broke onto the course, grabbed de Lima, and pushed him into the crowd.
 - ▶ He was a mentally unstable, defrocked Irish priest with a history of disrupting sporting events. He had a placard around his neck declaring the end of the world. Spectators were able to pull the man off and help de Lima back up, but sadly, the disruption cost him lead and the gold. He ended up with the bronze.

- ❖ That was a sad affair, but it turns out to be a great illustration. **It illustrates how, in the Christian life, we have to be on guard for those who might trip us up and knock us out of the race.** We have to watch out. Now sometimes these rivals (false teachers) might be blatantly obvious. They wear their false gospel on their sleeves. It's as if they're dressed like a crazy Irish priest. You can detect them a mile away.
 - ▶ But more often than not, they look like you and me. They don't overtly teach against the gospel or outright contradict Scripture. No, their falsehood is far more subtle. So they appear to be fellow runners. They're friendly and seem to have the best of intentions. But in the end, if you follow their lead and their teaching, they'll take you right off the course and right into destruction. You have to watch yourself and watch out for rivals in the race (2 John 1:8)

The Best Defense Against Deception

- ❖ This is what the Apostle John is warning of in this little letter we call Second John. He is writing to a unnamed local church. In v1 he addresses to "*the elect lady and her children*", which most commentators think is a metaphorical way of referring to a church and its members. If you look at v13, the letter ends with mention of "*the children of your elect sister*" – a reference to the church from which John is writing.
 - ▶ **Now we learn that this church is under intense pressure from rivals who had appeared to be on the same course.** But they were propagating a false gospel, one that denied the reality of the Incarnation – that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh.

- ❖ Now notice that these individuals had already deserted the church. We see that in v7. They “*have gone out into the world*”. They’ve left the church. This is similar to what John wrote in 1 John 2:19. That’s a related letter probably written to the same church. There John also mentions the presence of antichrists and how, “*they went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*”
- ❖ John is clear that these rivals are *not* genuine Christians, even though they once shared life with us in the church. Their “going out” from us (into the world) is proof they were never of us. If they had been of us, they would’ve continued. The Holy Spirit would’ve preserved them. They would’ve persevered. They would still be on the same course. But they’re not.
 - ▶ **They already left God, left the gospel, left the church. Yet in 2 John it appears they were taking advantage of the well-meaning hospitality of church members.** They still had a channel of influence, which meant the church was still susceptible to their deception. Others might join them in deserting God, the gospel, and the church.
- ❖ *So what’s the best defense?* As cliché as it might sound, according to John, the best defense is love. **If the members of a church commit to walking (running) together in mutual love, they’ll be well prepared to resist the influence of false teachers and their false gospels.**
 - ▶ I get this from vv5-7. John is exhorting them to walk in the command we’ve had from the beginning, the command to love one another. Look at the end of v6. He says this is the commandment . . . you should walk in it. And then in v7 he explains why. “*For (because) many deceivers have gone out into the world.*”
- ❖ Walk in love for one another *because* many deceivers have gone out into the world. This connection between vv6-7 is key. **The best defense against deception and desertion from the gospel is love – walking together in mutual love.**
 - ▶ This is not just any kind of love. Let me walk you through this short book and show you the kind of love we are to commit to walking in together.

Mutual Love Rooted in the Truth

- ❖ First, it’s a mutual love rooted in the truth. **The best defense against deception and desertion is to walk together in a mutual love rooted in the truth.** Notice what John says in v1. He’s writing to these Christians, “*whom I love in truth*”.
 - ▶ To love a person (or an entire congregation) in truth means that person(s) you love shares the same truth with you. What bound John and his readers together in love was a common truth – a common gospel. And John says not only do I love you but “*also all who know the truth*”.
 - All who believe Jesus really is who he claimed to be and really accomplished what he said he came to do are bound together. **A unique bond of love exists between those who know the truth – who are *in* the same truth.**

- ❖ This is different from the kind of bond that you might feel with those who share the same political ideology or a similar passion for sports. Agreeing on the gospel is not like agreeing on foreign policy or how to solve our country's domestic problems. It's not like agreeing on Jordan or LeBron being the greatest ever. You can agree on these things and feel sense of camaraderie. They might even touch your emotions. But they won't go much further.
 - ▶ **The truth of the gospel, on the other hand, runs deep and touches your very core, your very soul. A shared faith in Christ creates a bond that runs much deeper and lasts much longer.** John says that Christians share a mutual love because the truth of the gospel abides internally and eternally in us. Look at v2. We love each other, *"because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever."*
 - The gospel not something that you just happen to agree on with others in a church. No, it's something, that, if believed, gets internalized deep within our souls, and it knits us together in a spiritual bond – a bond mediated by the Holy Spirit who abides in us and will be with us forever just like the truth.

- ❖ *Have you ever experienced that?* You move to a new city or you start a new school or new job, and you meet someone for the first time. And this person could be totally different from you, but when you discover that the two of you share a common faith in Jesus – there's an immediate bond formed between the two of you. It's greater than the bond you share with those co-workers who have similar after-work interests. It's amazing how a shared truth in Christ can knit two people together in love.

- ❖ *Do you see what this connection between truth and love means for us?* As fellow members of this church, we ought to have a mutual love for each other – not because we all share compatible temperaments or similar personalities or common interests. **No, we ought to love each other because we share a common truth – the truth of Jesus Christ our Lord.**
 - ▶ It's the truth of Jesus that binds together a congregation of people so diverse that the world would naturally think we won't mix. We won't bond in love. Only if they could understand how unifying the truth of Jesus can be.

- ❖ Now here is **an aside for a Chinese church** like ours. Here's where we have to be on guard to make sure that our affinity for each other is not dependent on a shared ethnicity or cultural upbringing. The world is going to look at us and say, *"Yeah I totally understand why you guys are all friends. You're Asian. You share a common culture. I feel the same way with people from my own culture."*
 - ▶ **This is where we have to make every effort to elevate the truth of Jesus as the unifying bond between us – to make the gospel central to our unity.** So that anyone who shares in this truth can feel bonded in love with us regardless of what ethnicity or culture they're coming from.
 - What binds a church together should not be naturally explainable. It should be supernatural. It should be a spiritual bond rooted in spiritual truth. Christian love is founded on Christian truth.

- ❖ **And that means if you want this love to grow between fellow members of a church, if you want it to bloom, then it has to be firmly rooted in the soil of truth.** It's folly when people try to increase Christian love by diminishing the importance of the truth that unites us.
 - ▶ There will always be people – even well-meaning Christians – who get soft on truth because they know that truth makes people disagree and disagreement can lead to conflict. *“So let's stop focusing on truth, on theology, on doctrine, and let's just focus on loving each, on building unity. Truth will divide us but love will unite us.”*

- ❖ That's ridiculous. **The love that unites brothers and sisters in Christ can only flourish when firmly planted in the truth of Christ.** Love between a congregation that has an obscured connection with truth (or no connection at all) is like a cut flower removed from the soil. The love between that congregation will look nice in the short run (put it in a vase for all to see to be impressed), but it will soon wither. It won't last because it doesn't have the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever.

- ❖ **What's worse is that love without truth becomes love without discernment.** And a congregation loosely bound by that kind of love is particularly susceptible to false teaching. In trying to keep a superficial unity between parties, a church can fail to see that sometimes a line has to be drawn in the sand for the sake of love.
 - ▶ For love's sake we must steer our brothers and sisters away from falsehood that will lead them off course. For love's sake we must, at times, disagree and enter into conflict when supposed Christian teachers deny core tenets of the faith. It's for love's sake that we strive to be clear and sound in doctrine.
 - If you want to guard each other from deception, if you want to keep your kids from deserting the church and going out into the world, then love one another in truth. Love each other because you hold the same gospel, and for the sake of that love, exhort each other never let go and move away from that gospel.

Mutual Love for Preserving Gospel Truth

- ❖ That leads to our next point. Remember that connection between vv6-7. **Because many deceivers have gone out, we must keep the old commandment to walk together in love – particularly a mutual love for preserving (not progressing) gospel truth.**
 - ▶ I see this emphasized in vv7-9. Let's read v7, *"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."*
 - It's clear that these deceivers were not contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3). Instead they were progressing the faith and teaching something new, namely that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh.

- ❖ The best litmus tests for false teaching is to see what's being said about Jesus. But of course that means you need to know the essential gospel truths about Jesus. You need to know what John calls *“the teaching of Christ”* in v9. So what does this consist of?

- ❖ V7 says it begins with **Jesus' incarnation**. The gospel teaches that Jesus is God in the flesh. Now why is this essential to believe? Because if Jesus is just a man, then he cannot save you from your sins anymore than I can – for only God can save.
 - ▶ But, on the other hand, if Jesus were only God and not man, then he cannot represent humanity before God. To be a perfect mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5), he needs to fully represent both parties. He needs to be fully God, fully man. So we must hold to the Incarnation.

- ❖ Second, we must believe in **his substitutionary death** on the cross. Believing the Incarnation is precursory. For why did God become a man? So he could die for man.
 - ▶ God is love yet it's not a sentimental love. It's a holy love. And in his holiness, God cannot tolerate sin. He'll always punish it. But the good news of Christianity is that rather than leaving us to die for our own sins, the Son of God came and took our place. Jesus substituted himself in our place when he died on that cross.

- ❖ This leads to our third truth about Jesus, **his resurrection**. That God raised Christ from the dead demonstrates that God has accepted his death as a payment for our sins. And the Christian hope is that God will one day do for us what he did for Christ – that he too will raise us from the dead to live eternally with him on a new, renewed Earth.
 - ▶ And that's going to happen at **Jesus' second coming**. The belief that Jesus will return is an essential gospel truth. He'll establish his kingdom and make all things new. But in so doing, he'll judge the living and the dead assigning each to our eternal destiny.

- ❖ These are the essential doctrines that comprises the teaching of Christ. But these are the very truths that some were advancing away from. Look at v9, *“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.”*
 - ▶ **Notice how these false teachers were characterizing their teaching. They saw themselves as going on ahead.** The NIV describes it as running ahead. They saw their teaching as progressive. They had new ideas about Jesus.
 - False teachers always do this. They're partial to novelty. To them, old means outdated. New is better. Being progressive in one's understanding of the gospel is better than being stuck in stale, old orthodoxy.

- ❖ Now on one hand, Christians should be all about progressing in maturity, progressing in our knowledge of God. We should be excited about progress in science, technology, or medicine. But when it comes to Jesus, we need to slow down. **We must never run ahead of Jesus. We should never progress beyond the teaching of Christ.** John says our task is to abide in the teaching. To remain in it. To continue in it.
 - ▶ If someone were to show up teaching that the church has been wrong for the last 2000 years but I'm here straighten things out – don't run ahead with them. Run away from them! If they're peddling something new about Christianity, then they're likely peddling something false.

- ❖ *Now what does John say is the danger of not abiding in the teaching of Christ?* Look back at v9. The danger is no longer having God. You lose God. To deny or to twist any of these essential teachings of Christ has eternal consequences. This is what John says in v8. *"Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward."*
 - ▶ Does this mean you can lose your salvation? No, as we already saw in 1 John 2:19 that anyone who ends up denying the gospel and going out from the church is simply proving they were never really saved in the first place.

- ❖ *So then what is it that might be lost if these believers don't watch themselves?* **John is saying that all that he and the other apostles sacrificed and invested to plant and build up this church could be lost if they abandon the gospel.**
 - ▶ Think of the Ivy League schools like Harvard, Princeton, or Yale founded as convictionally Christian schools. But over time they tolerated false teaching and entertained progressive views of gospel truth, so that by our day they've abandoned their Christian heritage.
 - All the work of their founders to establish a Christian institution of higher learning was lost, and all because they failed to watch themselves. The same could be said of many mainline Protestant denominations in our country.

- ❖ *But what does this mean for us as a congregation?* It means we need a mutual love – a shared appreciation – for the old, old story and for teachers who will carefully preserve and guard the gospel as they hand it down from one generation to another.
 - ▶ I've said this to you before. **I would actually consider myself a failure as a preacher if you thought I was teaching you something new.** It's okay for the style or methodology to be something new or different. But the content – it better be old.
 - As a minister for the gospel, I don't want to be known for my creativity or ingenuity. I want to be known for my faithfulness to the gospel. And you, as members, should have a strong preference and high standards for that kind of teacher.

Mutual Love that Discriminates Against Untruth

- ❖ That's the best defense against deception – having a high standard for who can teach and influence in this church. That leads to our final point. **The best defense is walking together in a mutual love that is willing to discriminate against untruth and those who peddle it.**

- ❖ Some people have a hard time seeing how love could be discriminating. To discriminate sounds totally unloving. **But John has no trouble exhorting his readers to walk in love and simultaneously exhorting them to discriminate.** Because discrimination, in itself, is not morally wrong. It depends on what you're discriminating against and what's the basis for it.
 - ▶ Well let's see what John has to say. Look at vv10-11, *"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."*

- ❖ Now this is how some Christians are going to interpret this verse. They'll come across someone who disagrees with them on some point of theology or even the gospel itself, and they'll say to themselves, "*This person disagrees with the teaching of Christ, so I'm going to have nothing to do with them.*" They'll separate from everyone who disagrees.
 - ▶ They will make no effort to befriend non-Christians, whether they be Mormons, Muslims, or atheists. When a Jehovah's Witness knocks on the door, they won't invite him into their house to talk. And when other churches or Christians disagree with them over secondary or tertiary issues like their position on predestination, their end times view, they'll call that church or Christian false and then separate.
 - After all, isn't this what John is teaching? That we should not welcome them or even greet them? I want to show you why this is *not* what John intended.

- ❖ It's helpful to understand that, during the early days of the church, providing hospitality to traveling Christians was an important ministry since public inns had a notorious reputation for being dangerous, dirty, and filled with dubious characters. So travelers preferred to stay with friends or relatives. Well, this is how fellow Christians stepped up to love each other.
 - ▶ **Now according to their customs, to offer hospitality is to legitimize your guest before the rest of your community.** You're vouching for this person. In their culture, strangers (sojourners) in a community had no standing under local law, so they needed someone to receive them into their home and vouch for them.
 - So in that culture, receiving someone doesn't just say something about you and your generosity. It says something about your guest – that he or she is legitimately who they claim to be. So if they claim to be a Christian, you're validating that claim by receiving them, even if you have your own theological reservations. Do you see why this was a concern?

- ❖ Now since all churches in those days were house churches – they met in a member's home – **I think it's very likely that John was referring to teachers here and not your average congregant or neighbor.** The "you" in v10 is plural, which means he's addressing the entire congregation in the context of church. John doesn't have in mind the individual encounters you might have with people who disagree with you over Jesus.
 - ▶ And we're not talking about any casual visitor who shows up in our worship service. The context tells us that John has in mind these deceivers – these individuals who are seeking to influence those who remained in the church. These false teachers had already gone out, but it appears that well-meaning church members were still offering them hospitality and giving them a platform of influence.

- ❖ **John's concern was to curb their influence over this congregation.** So when he says not to give them any greeting, don't interpret that to mean you can't say hi. He's not saying to be rude and unwelcoming or to simply separate from anyone you disagree with theologically. If that were so, then that would contradict other apostolic instructions for how to engage non-believers (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9-10) and Jesus' own pattern of sharing meals with sinners and unbelievers (cf. Mt. 9:10-13; 11:19).

- ❖ **John's point is that if you inadvertently legitimize these deceivers by your hospitality, if you give them a platform, then you share in their wicked works.** You're just as responsible if their influence causes others to desert God, the gospel, and the church.
 - ▶ So if you really love your fellow church members – if you really love the false teacher! – then you'll be willing to discriminate truth from error to avoid legitimizing what is untrue.

- ❖ We take this very seriously at HCC. Out of love for you, we make sure that no man serves as a pastor here without first having his doctrine carefully scrutinized. Out of love for you and your family, we don't just let anyone teach or disciple your children in the Children or Youth Ministry. They have to be confident and clear on the essentials of the faith. The same applies to anyone in a recognized position of influence in this church – whether an elder, deacon, small group leader, Sunday School teacher, or guest speaker. If someone is not clear on the gospel, we won't give them a platform or voice of influence. It's love that motivates us.
 - ▶ Now on a personal level, you need to watch yourself and the kind of spiritual teaching you digest on your own. Be careful of which TV preachers you watch, whose sermons you podcast, and whose books you read. There's a lot of sermons and books out there that try to pass as Christian but sadly they've run too far ahead of Christ. You need to be on guard for yourself and your family.

- ❖ Brothers and sisters, the best defense is to love each other in the truth of the gospel. **When the gospel becomes the basis of our mutual love, when it has a central place in the life of our community, then no one among us will be ignorant to the teaching of Christ.** We'll know and cherish the real gospel and even the youngest among us will be able to detect counterfeit versions. So the best defense is love – loving each other deeply in the truth.