

Postcard From Jesus

We've now spent several weeks studying and reflecting on the Apostle John's first letter to Christians who lived two thousand years ago. The "Beloved Disciple," the one to whom Jesus had commended His mother as He hung on the cross, was the author of the Gospel of John, the book of Revelation, and three short letters to some early Christians.

His first was a "dear Children" letter to encourage them to stand fast, to remain in fellowship with God, to reject false teachers and to show true Christian love to each other. It still speaks eloquently to the moral and spiritual confusion of the 21st-century.

Today we'll consider John's second letter. It's really more of a postcard than a letter – very short. Actually it's one of the smallest books in the Bible. It is like a preface to the first letter, introducing John's themes. To have fellowship with God we must: 1) Know God's truth, 2) Obey God's commandments, and 3) Love God's children.

Elect Lady

All leaders of the early church attributed its authorship to John the Apostle, and most scholars agree that it was written by him, so 2 John is authentic. It's subject matter is identical to 1st John. This short epistle may well have been written as a cover letter to a woman who was evidently leading a congregation of Christian believers near Ephesus. Perhaps it was a fellowship that John had gathered and left in her care for instruction and discipleship; or she may have gathered new converts herself with John's blessing or as a result of his teaching. John writes to encourage her with good news about her children. She was evidently someone whom John and other believers respected and loved in the Lord, because of their shared faith in the truth of Jesus Christ (vs. 1-2). She was also one who hosted the fellowship in her home and was known for her hospitality (vs.10).

Given how John uses the term children in his first letter, we can assume that John here means the lady's children in the faith; that is, those people she has brought to Christ and given instruction in the Christian faith. John writes to assure her that the disciples she has instructed are indeed "*walking in the truth*" and warmly received into fellowship with him and other believers. He also writes to instruct her concerning how to deal with false teachers.

True Truth

As noted when I began this series with the first letter of John, early in the Christian movement spiritual counterfeits sprang up wherever the gospel

spread, and some who professed a Christian faith were led astray. Evidently this was the case with some of the congregations to whom John wrote and he reminds the “elect lady” that *“Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son,”* 2 John 9. Some of the false teachers had moved beyond the teachings of the apostles and Scripture, believing that they had greater spiritual insight than others. It was John Wesley who said: “It is dangerous to depart from Scripture ... most of the controversies which have disturbed the Church have arisen from people’s wanting to be wise above what is written, not contented with what God has plainly revealed.”

In his first letter John wrote: *“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life”* 1 John 1:1. He reminds us that he, along with the other apostles, lived the history we read about, the history he taught the believers, the history of Jesus and all that he was and is and means. Again, the emphasis is on loving God by obeying His commands. *“And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love,”* 2 John 1:6. Obedience to His commands, which brings along with it “perfect security” from the Father, is far better than many other “spiritual” actions we might undertake and hold closely to our hearts. God’s people have historically drifted from genuine obedience, which is genuine love of God, when they begin to substitute their own “good works” for obeying His commands. These “noble efforts” can take the place of implicit obedience itself.

Indeed, God does want your generous offerings of time and money ... it is a sign of giving yourself to Him. But remember, you can’t buy God. Do not entertain for a moment the thought that God desires your sizeable offerings and tithes more than your unreserved obedience in all the areas’ of your life. Doing some large and good service project, or even constructing a beautiful building to God’s glory does not absolve one of his higher responsibility to obey God (see I Kings 9:1-9).

Likewise, the rituals – formal and informal – that we follow and trust, are of no avail if they become an excuse to ignore the commands of God. We can be lulled into taking the Lord’s grace and protection for granted by going through the outward motions of faith, while all along our inward obedience is absent. This results in “Sunday only Christians” – those who act all pious and friendly on Sunday, but are a different person the rest of the week because they’ve shut out the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. There are always some who believe they can take shelter from the wiles of the evil one in church membership, as some sort of status. It is a preposterous notion that

church membership is all I require to receive Heavenly blessings whatever be my lifestyle! (See Jeremiah 7:4-14)

What is it about disobedience that displeases, nay breaks the Almighty's heart (see Jeremiah 14:17)? It is a statement, by virtue of our action, that we do not really love the very One to whom we owe our physical and spiritual existence. Mind you all the good we can do for Christ and for our neighbors is valuable and helpful. But never fool yourself that your good works make you righteous – this is the devil's lie. God seeks your heart given to Him ... from there He may well direct you to even greater and better good works.

Discerning Love

In this preparatory letter to the congregational host or leader, John warns against receiving those who teach falsehoods. *“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work,”* 2 John 10-11. What he means is allowing these false teachers to enter the fellowship and teach will only lead people astray from the true truth of Jesus. As with the other apostles, John has given them the true teaching because he was with Jesus before and after His resurrection and has shared from first hand experience who Jesus was and is and all that He taught, did, and does. Welcoming newcomers and welcoming falsehood are two very different things. We are to always preach the truth, support the truth about Jesus, and what Scripture says, with firmness. At the same time we are to treat others (even those who bring false teachings) with respect and love, seeing them as Jesus sees them.

It was Charles H. Spurgeon (English Baptist preacher 1834–1892) who wisely observed that discernment is not essentially the ability to know the difference between right and wrong. Rather, discernment is that which helps us distinguish between what is right and what appears to be almost right. Truth by nature liberates. *“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,”* John 8:32. We constantly face the temptations, distractions, and tricks of the Master Deceiver who seeks always to derail a Christian from the right path of leading a God-honoring life. Jesus well knew the one who first tempted Adam and Eve as *“... a liar and the father of lies,”* John 8:44.

Love's Commands

Throughout his Gospel and then his letters, John keeps repeating this theme of obeying God's commands, and that is what it means to love God. What commands is he talking about? They begin with the Ten Commandments given to Moses and continue through Jesus himself. Joshua reminded the Israelites, *“... be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: to love the LORD your God,*

to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul” Joshua 22:5. (“Keep my commands and follow them. I am the LORD.” Leviticus 22:31).

Jesus did not depart from this, “... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Then He said, “‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:29-31; while reminding all “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them,” Matthew 5:17.

Jesus also told his disciples, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another,” John 13:34. And, “If you love me, keep my commands,” John 14:15.

Our unity as Christians is really a unity in Christ Jesus and a oneness in the truth: “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” John 14:6. A oneness in He who is the truth is expressed in affection – “whom I love in the truth” – accepted as a possession – “because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever” – and expresses God’s blessings - “Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, will be with us in truth and love,” 2 John 3. This is teaching that comes from Jesus himself.

The practical application: “Great pastor, all this ‘love’ and ‘truth’ talk sounds nice but I live in the real world.” Have you noticed the “real world” lately? It is full of strife, selfishness, dishonesty, and all kinds of broken lives, which lead to broken relationships. This brokenness is the sin we’ve been talking about. How much brokenness do you want in your life, your family, your children, your home, your community, and beyond? The Lord wants 0%, and that’s what He wants for you and me. Obeying His commands is what repairs your broken lives and prevents the brokenness from spreading from you and into your children and beyond. Yes, I know there’s much worse out there in the community and world. But healing the nation or the world begins with you and me. Obeying Jesus’s commands, walking closely with Him day by day, studying Scripture to better understand who He really is and how to allow Him to guide you, bringing yourself and your children to church where His commands are reinforced ... that is the pattern of life that will bring stability to your life, peace to your home, and hope to your future. Do you want your marriage to be strong and stable? Make Jesus a partner. Do you want your kids to grow up knowing right from wrong, good from evil, to be compassionate and considerate, attentive and diligent? Teach them to know Jesus and follow him. Bring them to church regularly and follow Jesus yourself.

Jesus prayed for his disciples: “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one,” John 17:15. The key

to seeing through the lies and traps of the evil one is knowing what pleases the Lord the most and sticking to it. This is found throughout Scripture. Nothing pleases our Heavenly Father more than living a life of obedience to Him, for obedience is love in action, which implicitly listens and does what the Father says to His children without argument. What earthly father doesn't dream of a child who heeds his instructions? So it is with our Heavenly Father! That is because He loves us and wants what is best for us.

"And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love," 2 John 5-6.

Four times in this very short letter John uses the word "truth" and four times he uses "love." When we are walking in the truth (and the apostles and Scripture witness to the truth) then we will understand what God means by love and thereby exercise such love with one another and with all whom we live.

"As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love," 2 John 6.