

# Truth, Love, Obedience and Watchfulness

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[ 0 : 00 ] But if there's one person in the Bible other than Jesus that I just warm to, it's John, and I think I've said that before. John was a cousin of Jesus.

The Bible tells us he was the disciple that Jesus loved. And the two of them, they just had that special close bond. And when you read through his gospel and you also read through his letters here, you understand why, because he was just a wonderfully loving man.

The Bible tells us he loved his cousin Jesus. He obviously loved his Lord. You only have to read the short letter that we've read that you can see that he loved his church and he loved all of the people in it.

John was just a man full of love and devotion. And the people, as you probably gathered as you're working through, he views them as his close family, his church family, if you like.

And right the way through these three books, first, second, and John, he uses family words to describe them. At the start, he refers to the elect lady, which is the church.

[ 1 : 15 ] He refers to his children. And what he means by that is it's the people in the church. And right at the end, he refers to the elect sister, which is a sister congregation of the church that he is writing to.

And you can tell as well that he wants the very best for his family. He wants them to have the best life. And maybe if you turn back with me to 1 John, you'll see it's a common theme.

1 John chapter 1 and verse 4. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. If you turn then to 2 John verse 8, which we've just read.

Watch yourselves so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.

And if you go to 3 John and verse 2. Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health as it goes well with your soul.

So here is a man who loves his people, who wants the best for them. And you can see that his heart is right. You can see that his motives are good.

[ 2 : 38 ] And what this letter does in a year where we have major elections in the USA, the UK, and India is ongoing at the minute.

It's almost like a Christian manifesto in how we should live our lives and how we should be. And I think, I end up saying this all the time in nearly every sermon, it's radical.

It's radical in its simplicity. It's radical in its departure from what society thinks is acceptable or normal. It's radical as well, and I wasn't quite sure how to express this.

But it's radical in the absence of a long list of do's and don'ts. And rules would have been something the people he was writing to would have been very used to. Maybe they were from a Jewish background and they would have come from a works-based religion.

And that oppression they had of thousands and thousands of rules that they couldn't possibly even remember, even comply with. They lived in maybe cruel times in many cases where there was rules and laws and despotic rulers who oppressed them and saw themselves, in some cases, as the center of the universe.

[ 3 : 52 ] And there would have been church rules as well. And we will see a little of this as we go on. But one of the issues that John was helping people deal with in this early church was that there's a lot of people in and around the church who were introducing standards that were extra-biblical or contra-biblical and things that had to be complied with.

And it was against this background that John introduces his basic principles and what I'm going to call his Christian manifesto.

And the first one of these, as we said to the children earlier, was truth. And the first principle that John establishes here, that truth matters.

The word truth, if you go to 2 John and you read the first three verses, you'll find the word truth used three times in those in verse 1, whom I love in truth, in verse 2, because of the truth.

And in verse 3, from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in love, in truth and love. And he's establishing, as I said, that truth matters.

[ 5 : 06 ] But we live in a world where truth is an elusive and debatable thing. And I did, as I often do, I had an entirely unscientific trawl of the web on anything I could find about truth.

And I found articles talking about five theories of truth. I found articles talking about seven theories of truth. I found thousands of articles about the whole subject of truth and what it was and what it wasn't.

And there's one quote I found, which I thought I would read out to you. And it says, the problem of truth is, in a way, easy to state. What truths are, what, if anything, makes them true?

But this simple statement masks a great deal of controversy. And if you want to know who said that, it was the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, if you're so enamored to look that up later.

But my initial thought when I read this was, somebody's just spent way too much time in the library and needs to get out a bit more. But when I thought about it a bit more, it kind of captures the problem of our relationship with truth anyway.

[ 6 : 12 ] Because we live in a world where we have no idea what truth is. And we can't even find a definition of truth in a dictionary that we can all agree on.

And we see that manifested in so many ways. I refer often to my university days when part of my degree was in history.

It's political history is my first love. That makes me strange, I know, but I really enjoy it. And at the time, we did a lot of British history.

And the accepted belief was that the British Empire was based on free trade. There's a really famous article which anybody of my generation will have read called the imperialism of free trade.

But the world has changed in the last 30 years. The belief that the British Empire was based on slavery and exploitation. And that debate has, for those of you that watch the news or follow the news, the free church has been sucked into that debate in the last couple of days.

[ 7 : 13 ] For either their apology or lack of apology, depending which newspaper you read, of their receiving money from the slave trade. So all I'm saying there is, like over 30 years, the interpretation of something has totally changed.

We see it in churches as well. I'm not wanting to open old wounds here. But when I first arrived in Scotland to live, the church was going through a split, where both sides were horribly opposed.

And the point I'm making here is both sides were claiming, in some way, ownership of the truth or guardianship of the truth, even though views were different. And you all know, for those of you that have particular interest in US politics, it just floats my boat as well.

But, and I can't, and there's a reference that I want to pull out. And in this case, it was the use of the expression, alternative fact by Kellyanne Conway.

And I'm not taking sides on the issue she was talking about. And I don't want to take too far what she was actually trying to say, because I think the way it's been treated is probably not entirely what she meant. But it captures the notion that we can have different views of the same thing, and both can be accepted as facts.

[ 8 : 34 ] Both can be right, even though they're contradictory. And if you take that further, it's no longer that they have different opinions, but their opinions are both facts, and they're both right, even if one of them, even if they're different.

And if you take that concept even further, it goes to a question about who decides the truth. And in this case, what we find is the person who decides the truth is the person talking who's trying to promote a particular view, or the person listening.

They end up deciding the truth. So it's no wonder, those are just a few examples, but it's no wonder when we look at the complexity of how we view truth, that we don't know what it is.

And what John does here is he gets rid of all that muddled thinking, and he says we already know the truth. He says as well that the truth is important.

It's not up for debate. It's not temporary. It's not based on a fad or a trend. It will be the same today as it was a thousand years ago, and it will still be the same in a thousand years' time if the world is still here.

[ 9 : 47 ] And that truth is found in our Bible. Hold up your Bibles. Everybody hold up their Bibles. Put them up in the air. You've got the truth in your hand.

Remember that. The truth is in our Bibles. So if we read that, we will know, and this is not an exhaustive list, we know there is one true God.

We know the truth that his Son is Jesus, and he came to live on this earth to die for our sins. We know from reading this book that we are thoroughly sinful and corrupt in every way.

We know that salvation only comes through faith in Christ. We know that at the end of our lives there are two destinations, heaven and hell. We know that a genuine faith is secure.

We know that the source of truth is God, and we know that that truth is found in his Word. So John is saying, you have the truth. You know you have the truth, and because you have it, you absolutely have to use it, because it will equip us for everything we face in life, whether that be good or bad, happy or sad, or easy or difficult.

[ 10 : 58 ] Everything that we will face, you have the truth. Use it. And if you do that, it will help you avoid all these fuzzy lines that I've been talking about, all this confused thought that enslaves ourselves, enslaves the world that we're in, and the people that we know.

You have the truth. It was in your hand. Use it. That's the first thing in John's manifesto. You have the truth. Use it and don't confuse it.

Now the second thing in John's manifesto is love. And in simple terms, because we have the truth, we are people who love. But the world in which we live, it's different in other parts of the world, I don't know, but the world in which we live, because we have a really messed up view of truth, we subsequently have a really messed up view of love as well.

And again, in a totally unscientific thing, people's view of love, it can be an emotional connection. We just clicked kind of thing. Love can be something which is smooth and easy and comes naturally.

Love can be something which is Barbie pink and fluffy. Love can be a physical attraction or a physical act. Sometimes love involves commitment.

[ 12 : 18 ] And rather bizarrely, sometimes love doesn't involve commitment. You know that really dodgy line, let me go, that sort of thing. Other times, it involves an acceptance, regardless of faults or wrongs.

Sometimes love can be very passionate, but other times, you know, people whose love for each other is almost intellectual and understated in other ways. And there is merit in many of these things.

But with all these views of love, the common thing, with all these views of love that we find in the culture that we live in, the common theme about them all is that they're hard to pin down.

They're all kind of intangible. I'll use this expression a few times. They're fuzzy around the edges and even contradictory at times. But the Christian view of love is not like that.

Love to a Christian, it's solid, it's real, it has a sure foundation. It's something you can identify. Why can you identify it? Well, because it's based on the knowledge that God loves us or part of his truth.

[ 13 : 32 ] And this is not an exhaustive love, but we know that we love so much that Jesus died on the cross for us. We know that God loved us so much that Jesus died on the cross despite our hopeless natures that we all have.

We know that we're loved so much that the salvation that we have is totally assured regardless of what happens in the future.

And because we have that truth, how can we not love each other? How can we be anything but kind or thoughtful? We cannot be anything but the person who gives that helping hand or shares a burden.

And you know what, and we do that not just to the people that we bond with and the people we care for, but also the people that we don't, even to the people who persecute us or hate us or cause us harm.

And that may be difficult to hear, but remember before you became a Christian, that person who persecuted, that person who you hated and loved was you in your relationship with God.

[ 14 : 41 ] And I want you to look, because as well with love, we love, we are commanded to do it. Turn with me to a couple of verses.

Leviticus chapter 19 and verse 18. I'll read it out.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

Strong word. You are commanded to love. Look as well with me. It's not a surprise that you find it in John's gospel, but the gospel of John chapter 13 and verse 34 and 35, very similar to what we read in this letter earlier.

A new commandment. Notice that. A commandment. I give to you that you love one another just as I have loved you. You also are to love one another.

[15:43] By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another. What the Bible is telling us here, that love, it's not an emotional thing, but love is an act of will.

It's something that we choose to do. And B, because we have the truth of God in our hearts. And that's why we can love people who are cruel to us or don't love us back or just generally mean or even in some situations persecute us.

When I was preaching here, I talked about Corrie ten Boom, one of my favorite modern characters. And I said, I told the same story. But she met in a meeting one of the Nazi concentration guards who had persecuted her and was partially responsible for the death of her sister.

And because she had that truth in her heart, she made a decision at that point when she met that man to love him. And she was able to do that.

It was a conscious act of will at that point in time. Because love is a commandment of all believers. You have no option but to love even the worst of people.

[17:04] You're to love them as yourself. Now, we move on. And so the first point of her manifesto was truth.

The second point of her manifesto was love. Love as a commandment rather than an emotion. The third point of John's manifesto of Christian living is obedience.

And if you think about it, obedience is not that popular thing these days. When I was young, and those of you who grew up in Northern Ireland will know exactly what I'm talking about, the emphasis was very different.

In church, there was a clear emphasis on right and wrong. And if I'm being really honest, the emphasis was always on what was wrong. If my memory is right.

And I'm not saying that was right. At times, it was a tad legalistic. But at least it was clear. You knew the boundaries. And you knew what you could and couldn't do. But nowadays, it seems to me that we've swung the other way.

[18:06] And we emphasize our freedom. The freedom to think what we want. Say what we want. Go where we want. The freedom to do with our bodies what we want. Live our lives in accordance with our own values.

Whatever. We don't like to be answerable to anyone. Corrected by anyone and so on. Often, freedom involves a freedom to do things which are wrong and harmful.

And as we saw in our Scottish Parliament a few weeks ago, a freedom, a freedom to take a view that goes against somebody's freedom of religion as well.

And John takes a different view from this. Much like we read in the first three verses where it mentions truth four times, if you look at verses 7 to 11, it mentions the word commandment four times.

and it flows naturally from the first point about having the truth. John, as we read here, he delighted members who received the truth and were walking in it.

[19:11] And it says there, just as they were commanded to do. So what is John telling us here? We have the truth so we are to believe it.

We are commanded to believe it. We are to love the Bibles. We are to know it. We are to follow all that it says without question. We are not to skim on our learning more and more each day about what the Bible says to us.

And because we have this truth, we are to behave in such a way that is worthy and faithful to it. We are to obey it. The Bible, from start to end, is full of ethical, moral, and theological teaching which we are commanded to follow and it must show in every area of our life.

In our home lives, we are to run our homes properly. We are to run our marriages properly. When we go to work, we are commanded to work hard.

We are best and act in a way that is full of integrity and compliance and in a way that stands out as an outstanding employee.

[ 20 : 22 ] In the world that we're in, Christians, we've got to have integrity about us, we've got to be upstanding in all that we do. We comply with laws regardless of what they are to the extent that they do not contradict what the Bible says.

We are to be good neighbors, we are to be good friends, we are to show respect and courtesy and love and care for the communities in which we are in. And we do all these things not because we have some sort of social conscience or seek to get something out of it.

We obey because we are people of faith and our faith includes a commandment to obey what God tells us. And it's not an oppressive thing, it's a wonderful thing.

It's a wonderful thing because we have benefited so much from the faith of our Heavenly Father who's done so much for us that we want to live our life in a way that pleases Him and that is to obey what He says.

And that obedience is not limited in any way, it's total, it's unqualified, it's excellent and precise, it's conscious of all the details, it is from the heart, it's driven by the truth we talked about, it's not for show, it's not for, it's not external, it's not qualified or partial in any way but covers all that we do in all the places we are at all times.

[ 21 : 54 ] So those are the three things, truth, love and obedience. And I think the final thing that John tells us here is that we are to be watchful because we live in times now which are where there's so many things that can harm us and it comes from so many directions and, you know, I look at the children particularly, you know, they've got phones, they've got computers, they've got friends, they've got influences in school, they've got influences all around them and they're so young and they have to face so much more than I ever had to face.

But they, and yes, it's particularly tough for kids but I think it can be tough for us all because there's so many things that can lead us down the wrong road, it can drive us to compromises that should never be.

And John, as I said right at the start, he was helping the church ward off these difficulties and the last time here we talked about the church in Colossians and they had these charismatic and plausible characters who taught them that Christ's salvation is not enough.

And in this liberal world that we live in, it's the same sort of thing as the church who wants to accommodate everyone and not want to offend anyone in the mistaken belief that God's love will override his demand for righteousness.

And John refers to them in this book as people who go on ahead. In modern terms we would probably call them progressives, the most misused word in the English dictionary at the minute because they're anything but.

[ 23 : 37 ] But the common theme of them all is that they either add, take away or rewrite the Bible. And John's manifesto says that we must watch out for them.

How do we identify them? Well, we identify them because we have the truth that is in our Bible. And Jesus, he warned his disciples to be on their guard.

And John warns the church here in this letter to be much the same. There's to be no complacency. There's to be no accommodation of what is wrong. There's to be no joint fellowship or activity that be interpreted that way.

John's language is very strong here. He says these people are imposters. They are deceivers. He says they are anti-Christ. And John tells us keep them away.

If they're outside of the church, don't let them in. Don't give them a foothold. If they are inside the church, get rid of them now. It's the same in your life.

[ 24 : 41 ] If they're in your life, get rid of them. And John's words are strong. I don't think he means that you don't be neighborly and polite to them. He doesn't mean that. But John's words are strong.

He says, don't even let them into your house in that context or greet them because if you do, you will help them and you will share evil in their evil plans.

And not only that, he'll be bringing others down with them. So John tells him be watchful. And I'll end there. I'll bring this to a close.

But we can make life so complicated at times. We can do this even with the best of intentions. We can introduce rules or guidelines that maybe are well intended but over time become meaningless or harmful.

Or in the situation I grew up with, we had the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th of the commandments of things that we could not do. And at the other end of the spectrum, we can emphasize our freedoms.

[ 25 : 46 ] And often when we do that, it comes at the expense of our commandment to love each other and to obey what God has said. And often, it is as a result of letting your guard down.

John says, stop, stop doing that. Listen to what John says. It's simple. John says, it's simple. And if we follow what it says, it makes it easier for ourselves and for everyone here to comply. Four basic principles. Remember, truth, love, obedience, and watchfulness.

And I've given you a whole list of things that you must do and mustn't do. But why does John do it? Well, let's read 1 John 1, verse 4 again. John tells us to do these things so that our joy may be complete.

John tells us to do these things not because he wants you to live a pretty miserable life. He tells you to do it because he wants your life to be happy. That's his loving nature.

[ 27 : 01 ] He's not doing this with any kind of overarching, I'm old, I know what I'm talking about, do what I say. He's doing it because he wants you to be truly happy. And that's where I want to end it.

You want to be truly happy? Truth, love, obedience, and watchfulness. Amen.