

Truth and Love

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[0 : 00] Amen. Now, some of you may be aware that for some eight years or so in the 1980s, I was the National Director of the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students.

Heather and I looked at those days with great fondness. And one of the great joys of those days was that I met many great Australians from around the country.

There's one person, though, that I particularly remember whom some of you may know of. His name was Paul White. Some of you, as I said, will be familiar with him. He was well known as the Jungle Doctor.

And some may have read his books, particularly his stories for children. You might have read them to your own children or grandchildren or whatever. For a number of reasons, Paul and I got on well and we became firm friends.

He was an old man in the last 10 years of his life. He was an incredibly wise man who had turned his experience of life and ministry into a treasure trove of, well, great, valuable advice.

[1 : 31] So, you know, that treasure trove of life just came to me. And I would go and see him once every three or six months. And he would talk because he knew how to talk.

And I would listen because I wanted to mine as much of this as I could. Sometimes his wisdom came to me through stories because he's a great storyteller or rebuke.

Or prayer or just chatting about life. This man taught me how much you could gain at the feet of older people.

Well, today we're going to sit at the feet of an older man. And we're going to see what we can gain from his wisdom. You see, this shortest letter in the New Testament to John is written by the Apostle John.

And from what we know, he was probably not much older than a teenager when he met Jesus, perhaps still a teenager. For three years he'd traveled with Jesus. And he was in that inner group of the disciples of Jesus.

[2 : 34] And you don't have to read very far in the Gospels to see that there was obviously a very deep affection between Jesus and this young man. But the John who writes to John is no longer a young man.

In verse 1, he's simply called the elder. And that's probably because he was exactly that. Not he was an elder in the church, but he was an older man.

He was actually now an old man. So I want you to open your Bibles at 2 John. So if you can't find it, maybe there's a page number there. But look, it's so easy to find. You just start at Revelation, work your way back.

And before long, you'll come across 1 John. And we just have to look after that. And there's 2 John. Now, we're told that he's writing to the lady chosen by God and to her children.

I think that probably means a Christian congregation. Now look at verse 4. Here John the elder tells us he's aware that certain members of this congregation, or he's aware of certain members of this congregation, and he knows them to be people who walk in the truth.

[3 : 36] It appears as though, as he's met these people, he's impressed with what he finds. Verse 12 indicates that he decided to follow up his letter with a visit to them. This letter that we have is a short letter, much like many of the other letters that circulated through the ancient world.

However, it's also a letter that contains some of the key points that this older Christian leader thought should characterize the Christian life of these people, and therefore, all people who are Christian.

In other words, it contains a summary of what John the elder considers important for us as Christian people. So let's hear what he has to say. Now, my view, you could summarize this letter of John in

two headings.

I think he's saying there are two things that matter if you're going to be Christian. Right doctrine matters, and right conduct matters. Right doctrine matters, and right conduct matters.

Let's see what he has to say about right doctrine. First thing to notice is the number of times the word truth occurs. In fact, if you read verses 1 to 4, it's a constant echo through those verses.

[4 : 42] Twice in verse 1, once in verse 2, once in verse 3, and again in verse 4. The implications of what John is saying is this, that to become or be a Christian involves interaction with truth.

It's about accepting truth, the truth that is in Jesus. It's about going on in that truth or walking in that truth. You see, truth matters for the Christian.

The importance of truth comes out in verses 7 to 11. Have a look at them. John says, I say this to you because many deceivers who don't acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh have gone into the world.

Such a person is a deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God, and whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

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.

[5 : 57] You can see what's going on here, can't you? John knows that we Christians live in a world set against God. He knows that wherever Christ is proclaimed, there will be people who actively set themselves against Jesus Christ and the truth about him.

Verse 7 says that in his day, such deceivers were present in the church. It's amazing to think, isn't it? That in such a short period of time, deceivers would come.

But if you read any of the letters in the New Testament, you will find that they took no time at all. Deceivers come into the church of God, and they've come into this church.

The particular heresy I suspect here is that they maintain that Jesus was not fully human, that he had not come in the flesh. He calls them deceivers. Now, then he calls them something even stronger, the Antichrist or Antichrists.

In our day, let me say, it's not that they're more likely to say that Jesus was not fully human. And I think in our day, they're more likely to say that Jesus was not fully divine or that his resurrection was not real.

[7 : 05] And there are leaders of the church in Australia who say those things. No matter what, John is making the point that the world we live in and even the churches we are part of can contain people who are active in deception, who are deceivers themselves, who are Antichrists.

There will be opposition to the truth about Jesus. There will be deceivers. There will be Antichrists. And friends, they are active in our church, hopefully not in ours, but in the churches throughout Melbourne, throughout Australia, throughout the world.

John then goes on to explain how these early Christians could combat such deception and fight for truth. He gives some positive advice as to how to do it, and he gives some practical advice as to how to protect against deception.

First, the positive advice. Look at verse 8. John talks about not losing what you have worked for. Then in verse 9, he tells us how to avoid losing what we've worked for.

The advice is clear. If you want to avoid deception and avoid losing your relationship with God, then continue in true teaching or true doctrine. And this true doctrine is the true teaching about Jesus and the Father.

[8 : 19] Now, let me say that John's point rings out. You see, it is a constant temptation for Christians to be moving past Jesus. But John, the rest of the New Testament writers are clear.

To run on ahead of Jesus, ahead from Jesus, is to leave Jesus behind, isn't it? It is to desert Jesus. It is to be sucked in by deception.

However, let's now move on and take a look at the one bit of practical advice he gives about avoiding deception. It is very, very practical. Look at verses 10 and 11. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, don't take them into your house or welcome them.

Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work. It's a very simple piece of advice. This letter is so clear.

Knowing the truth is important. Guarding the truth is critical. And doing that requires vigilance. And it requires practical commitment. Let's move on from right doctrine and talk about right conduct for a moment.

[9 : 32] You'll notice that the first four verses not only talk about truth. Can you see it there? They also talk about love. And then even more in the verses that follow. You see, John is very clear that the mark of a Christian is not just a concern for truth.

It's also a concern for love and the practice of love. Look at verses 5 and 6. And now, dear lady, I'm not writing to you a new command, but the 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've heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

The point is strong. The God who calls us to be faithful to truth also calls us to be faithful to love. To love each other.

The central requirement of everyday life for the Christian is love. Now, the love being talked about is not so much the love we see on our television screens.

[10 : 31] It's not emotion. It's not primarily emotion. It's rather a love of the will. It's the conscious decision that a Christian makes. That they will give themselves to the obedience of God's command in caring for others.

It is loving as we have been loved. You see, as Christ laid down his life for us, so we will give up our rights and lay down ourselves for the interests of others.

So, friends, there we have it. Just in a nutshell, the core of what this little letter is saying. Here is John's advice to a first century congregation. It's God's advice to us now.

We are to be people with a devotion to truth and a fixation with love. And these two things are not to be things we pay lip service to.

They are to be things that are to be reflected daily and practically in our lives. Having said this, we need to reflect on the relationship between doctrine and conduct.

[11 : 32] You see, my view is that we as Christians often get the balance wrong. There are groups of Christians who appear to focus on, concentrate on doctrine to the detriment of love.

And there are other groups of Christians who appear to concentrate on love to the detriment of doctrine. And those two groups are often critical of each other, aren't they? Perhaps you've heard them do it.

One group criticises the other for being caught up in getting their doctrine right. And so concerned are they with that that they lack love and concern for others or are sectarian in outlook.

In turn, the other group, well, they are critical because the first group is nothing more than a social concern group. The disagreement between those two groups turns up in many different shapes.

But underneath it, there is always this question. How do we get this balance right? This balance between truth and love? Let's see if John can give us some hints as to how to do it.

[12 : 31] After all, John is an expert on the issue of loving our brother and sister in Christ. You don't have to read. Well, you could read anything that John writes and you'll find that this just comes brimming out of the page. He's sure, therefore, to have an opinion on this issue.

How do you get these things right? Surely he can send us in the right direction. So to get started about this, I want to think about John's epistles. And I want you to think about, you know, one and two, John and three, John, and ask this question.

If you do not love God or others enough, where should you start becoming more loving? Okay. If you don't love God and others enough, where should you start in becoming more loving?

How are you going to become more loving if you're not doing it very well? How do you think John would answer that question? Well, let's go back just a chapter or two. In your Bibles, you're in 2 John.

Flip back to 1 John, chapter 4. Specifically look at 1 John 4, 7 to 12. And then verse 19.

[13 : 35] Look at what John says. Dear friends, let us love one another for love comes from God. Remember the question we're answering. If I don't love God and others enough, where should I go to start becoming more loving?

Have that question in your mind as you read this. Dear friends, let us love one another for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love.

This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. This is love. Not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God. But if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Now down to verse 19. We love because he first loved us. So what's the answer? Do you see what John's saying? Do you hear the link between knowledge and love?

[14 : 35] Love springs from knowing how God has loved us in Jesus Christ. Our love for God and our love for others springs out of our knowledge and experience of his love for us.

In other words, we look at how God loves and that shows us how we should love. In other words, to love rightly, we need to know what love is. And we find out what love is by observing what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

That's how truth and love are to be linked. As God's people, the love we have for God and others is to be theologically grounded. It is grounded and rooted deep in the knowledge of God's love for us. Practically, that means if our love for God or others is not all it should be, then what do we do? We go to the truth of God's word. We're to soak ourselves in it. We're to see how God loves us.

We soak ourselves in the scriptures. We see what is God's being and character like. Meditate on how he's loved us. And particularly, we go to that greatest demonstration of his love, the death of Jesus on the cross.

[15 : 42] And we constantly feed our minds and our hearts with the truth that is found in the cross. That God could not possibly love us more than he does.

And he'll never love us less than he does in the cross. God has loved us with a very deep love. And he will never let us down. He will never give us up.

He will never give up on us. Never, not for one moment, will God stop loving us, his children. And we need to read some of the great passages of the Bible about God's love, memorize them and ruminate on them and have them in our minds all the time.

And then we need to look at our brother and our sister and even our world and act as God has acted toward us. As God forgives, we are to forgive. As he accepts, well, so we are to accept.

As Jesus is willing to leave his father's side and suffer humiliation and death for us, so we should be willing to put aside our rights and benefits and suffer in order to bring the great news of Jesus to others.

[16 : 47] As Jesus is willing to go to us, his enemies, so we should be willing to act with kindness and generosity to all, even our enemies. As he laid down his life for us, so we should lay down our lives for each other's.

Friends, can you see how truth and love are related? Love flows from a heart deeply rooted in true teaching about God and Jesus.

Love flows from lives deeply affected by that teaching. True doctrine will lead to true conduct. And if it doesn't, the teaching might be wrong. On the other hand, love that is not fed by true doctrine is not the sort of love God wants us to give.

Now, in the last part of what I'm saying this morning, I want to talk to practicalities of all of this. As has become my habit every now and then, I want to talk about this in two sections.

What this means for us as individuals and what this means for us as a congregation of God's people. Let's think about us as individuals. How can we as individuals show our love for truth?

[17 : 55] Well, one way to do it is to practically feed it, to feed the truth. How do we feed the truth? By feeding our hearts and our souls with God's word.

We do this by soaking ourselves deeply in the truth of what God has done for us in Jesus. How do you do that? Well, we expose ourselves to God's word as much as we can.

Now, Christians over time have found that one of the best ways to do this is spend time daily reading the scriptures. I haven't generally talked to you much about this, but I'm going to do so now. I think, unfortunately, this habit of reading the scriptures daily has dropped out of fashion. It's often not done. But, look, think of our lives.

We develop habits of exercise and family time and diet, don't we? We form our lives around these things. And we know that if we neglect these habits, that we'll suffer.

[18 : 56] Well, we neglect the habits of spiritual life to our peril. You see, we need to exercise habits that will keep our spiritual lives intact and healthy.

And so, if you've let things slip in this area, I want to encourage you to develop two habits. The first is a regular time of Bible reading and prayer. Get started with something that is manageable and reachable and develop from there.

You know, a chapter a day of the Bible. Second is to get back to memorizing key passages in the Bible. I wonder when the last time you did that is. To start, you could pick some key passages about God's love and write them down on the back of a business card or, you know, some other piece of paper.

Carry it with you each day. Memorize it. Meditate on it. And if you're technologically savvy, you could do it on your phone and you don't have to carry the piece of paper. Next bit of practical application is to determine to shun deceivers.

You see, we live in a Christian world where tolerance and information is prized. Tolerance is, I think, one of the greatest virtues in the Western world.

[20 : 13] You must be tolerant. Tolerant. We're told we need to be tolerant. Well, to be informed and tolerant about that which is not true is not a Christian virtue, let me tell you. Determine that you will not allow your home or your mind to become a place where deception and falsehood is allowed to enter.

And work on practicing love in your home, with your husband, your wife, your parents, your household, in your Bible study group, in the exercise of hospitality.

It's your decision about how you, or even in your decision about how you'll reach the world for Christ. Reflect on what Christ has done for you and determine, that's how I'm going to act toward others.

So, friends, can we take that on board? Give a right place to doctrine and a right place to love in our lives.

Let's close by reflecting on how we can put these things into practice as a congregation. First of all, how can we feed the truth as a congregation? Well, I take it that we do this by keeping an eye on what we've already been doing.

[21 : 23] We keep on concentrating on teaching the Bible clearly in church, in our small groups, in our one-to-one meetings. We also ensure that we shun deceivers. We can do this by not allowing people to speak at our church who are not clearly for the truth of the gospel.

Any of my staff who invite people to preach at this church, I ask them to let me know so I can check up on them. To make sure that we're not having people teach here who don't teach the truth.

Also, we can do this by making sure we don't advertise events that are not clearly about truth. So, when I get masses of people sending me information about, will you commit to this and that and so on, and will you advertise this?

I don't advertise things that I think are not about the truth. They just go in that square container under the desk in the office, which gets shredded.

I don't want to do that. So, I'm not letting things even enter into our life together. Sometimes that means I'll deliberately not promote interdenominational events that are more about suffering the distinctive Christian truths in order to join with others than they are about other things.

[22 : 33] We will work hard at being a place that is sound in teaching and doctrine, but we'll also work hard on it not being lacking in love and godliness.

Now, what will that mean? That will mean that our teaching is not esoteric, but we'll constantly be concerned about how the truth is applied. So, we work hard on applying truth.

That means we'll actively encourage each other to exercise Christian love and concern. It means that decisions we make as a congregation will be fed by concern for other people's welfare.

We'll be active in evangelism. We'll be committed to mission. And we'll be active in social concern for each other and the community we live and work within. Brothers and sisters in Christ, as your pastor, I want to say that it gives me great joy to find a number of you walking in truth and active in love.

I was away, you know, in the time I was away, for three and a half months, I boasted about you regularly, that you were lovers of truth and lovers of love. But we need to excel even more, don't we?

[23 : 41] To develop a passion for truth and a fixation with loving God and loving each other. These are the things that bring joy to our Father's heart. So, let's pray.

