

This is Love

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[0 : 00] Almighty God, we thank you for your word and pray that you may speak to us now through it. Fill our hearts with love and truth.

For Jesus' sake, amen. You may like to have the passage from 2 John open, page 992 in the Pew Bibles.

Some of you may remember the controversy caused by an Australian theologian who wrote a book about Jesus, in effect saying that he was not the Son of God, not really God divine in human form and wasn't really who the Bible says he was.

One of her books, she's written several, each of which is controversial and heretical, came out in about 1992 when I was teaching at Ridley College.

And many of us on the faculty there were fairly quick to make it clear that the views espoused in those books were thoroughly heretical. But there were others who were much more cautious and actually spoke up saying that rather than denounce her views, we should be expressing our great love for her as a person.

[1 : 21] At the risk of being simplistic in dividing those two groups, some were saying that truth is very important and error must be exposed, and others saying that love is very important.

How do we respond to such a person, such issues? More recently, in the last year or two, one of the notorious American Episcopalian bishops was preaching at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne.

Bishop Spong. And now he's written various books, again rejecting some of the central things about Jesus that the Bible teaches. Alvestri wrote a letter of complaint to the Dean of the Cathedral saying, we thought such a person ought not to be invited to preach there.

How do we respond? Well, this little letter, the smallest letter of the New Testament, 2 John, addresses that sort of issue, that sort of dilemma.

Just 13 verses, very brief letter, one that's all too easy to skip over and overlook. In essence, the book is, or the letter is saying, two things need to be and are essential for Christians to hold equally, truth and love.

[2 : 45] They are mutually consistent. They're not opposed to each other. Indeed, held properly together, they actually feed each other.

Well, this little letter begins like most ancient letters. The writer declares who he or she is, unlike in our letters where we don't declare who we are until the very end of the letter.

The addressees are then named. There's usually a little greeting and then the substance of the letter. Now, in this case, the writer describes himself as the elder.

The Greek word is presbyter, from which we get the name Presbyterian. Tradition has it that this is the Apostle John, one of Jesus' 12 disciples, whom we know lived to an old age, who authored the Gospel of John and these three letters, 1, 2, 3 and John, as well as writing down what he saw in the Revelation to St John.

The addressees are named in an odd way, the elect lady and her children. Some think a specific woman is intended here and her family, but most probably it is a way of describing a church to which this letter is written.

[4 : 01] Sometimes the church is described in female terms in the Bible, for example, as the bride of Christ, and perhaps because of the threat of persecution or something like that, the way of describing the church is a little bit cryptic.

Maybe if the letter fell into the wrong hands, it would bring danger to people. Anyway, the letter is written, it seems, to a church, the elect lady and her children, that is the members of the church.

Maybe the elect lady is the leader of the church or maybe it's just the church as a whole. But before John gets to his standard greeting, he sounds the themes of the letter.

He describes the church as, whom I love in the truth. And there at the very beginning are the themes of this letter, love and 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. John is saying here that there is a bond of love between him and the church to whom he writes.

[5 : 05] But it's a bond of love not created by mutual affection or attractability or compatibility. It's a bond of love that is established by the truth of the gospel.

Because this church and John the writer are Christians, they've come to be Christians through the truth of the gospel, there is an essential love between them.

It's the same for all Christian people, whether we've met them or not. There is to be a mark of love between Christian people because they're Christians, established in the truth of the gospel.

That's the love that John is expressing and that's what he means when he says, whom I love in the truth. The word for love is one that in ancient Greek it seems was not all that commonly used, but seems to be used distinctively in the New Testament to describe a love that is marked by sacrifice, by giving, by an other-centredness rather than self-centredness, that is marked by loyalty and commitment.

It is certainly not the word of love that's used for erotic or romantic love or even just brotherly love, although it incorporates that sort of idea as well.

[6 : 23] It's a very significant word in the New Testament. It's the word that describes God's love for his people, that is a giving, sacrificial, loyal love for his people, and it's the love that is to be reciprocated to God by Christian people as well as amongst Christian people.

That is the love that John speaks of here. And the ground of that love is the love that God expresses to us through the gospel. Then he goes on to his standard greeting in verse 3.

This is typical of many of the letters of the New Testament. Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son. It's very much like the greetings of some of the letters of Paul and Peter, for example.

It is slightly unusual, though. He says not only grace, mercy, and peace, usually that's expressed as a prayer. Grace, mercy, and peace be with you. But here it's a promise.

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with, not you but us. John is including himself in this greeting as well. Grace, mercy, and peace in a way summarise the Christian gospel.

[7 : 37] Grace is God's gift of salvation. Mercy is our need for it and God's extension of mercy to us to meet our need. And peace is what we enjoy with God and each other as a result of receiving God's grace and mercy.

In a sense, that little statement summarises the Christian gospel for John's readers. The other unusual thing about his greeting is the way it ends. In truth and love.

John's distinctive themes of this letter being wrung out in almost every verse. Grace, mercy, and peace, you see. The blessings of the gospel are only those, or belong to those, who are in truth and love.

Well, then he comes to the substance of his letter from verse 4. And he develops his point. Like Paul in many places, he expresses his joy at what he's heard about the people to whom he writes.

It is a good example to follow, I suppose, in expressing our joy to God about other Christian people and our joy to those Christians when we hear of them continuing in faith.

[8 : 49] What John is overjoyed to find, though, is perhaps muted. I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth.

Some people suggest that that's actually a slightly negative way of saying things. That is, he's saying, I'm overjoyed to find some of your people with the implication that others of you ought to be likewise walking in the truth.

Or it may just be that John only knows of some. He cannot speak for all. Whatever the case is, there are at least some in this church who are faithfully walking in the truth.

That is, they are following the direction of God's truth. They are practising and behaving what is true from God. That is, they are obeying his commandments.

To walk in truth is the metaphor to live in it, to practise it, to make as your habit and behaviour obedience to God's words as they've been expressed in the scriptures.

[9 : 54] But this is not just a remote obedience. It is also relational and personal. For truth is ultimately embodied in Jesus Christ, the one who said, of course, I am the truth.

So to walk in truth is not only to be obedient to God, but it is to live in a relationship with his son, Jesus Christ, and therefore with God the Father as well.

That is what some of John's readers are doing. He adds to it now another command. Verse 4, he acknowledges that God has commanded that his followers walk in truth.

So too does God command that they walk in love. But now, dear lady, I ask you, he says in verse 5, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning.

That is, let us love one another. We've just sung a song that says, a new commandment I give you, that you love one another.

[11 : 02] And it was new. Jesus said those very words in John chapter 13. But for John, this John, now writing later in the century, it's no longer a new commandment.

It's an old commandment. And so his exhortation to them to love each other is not something new or novel. He's reminding them that it is fundamental.

It comes, in fact, from Jesus' lips himself. Now this is a command to mutual Christian love. There are times in the scriptures when we're told to love our neighbour, whoever that is, whether or not they're Christian.

And we are told, too, to love our enemy, whether or not they are Christian. But the focus of this love is mutual Christian love between Christian people.

In effect, John, as Jesus did as well, lifts mutual Christian love onto a higher plane, not dismissing our love of our neighbour or our love of our enemy, but showing the essential, central importance for Christian people to love each other.

[12 : 17] How do we do that? John hints at that in verse 6. And this is love. That is, this is what it means to love one another.

That we walk according to his, God's, commandments. This is the commandment, just as you've heard it from the beginning. You must walk in it.

It's not a circular argument because what John is saying here is that to love one another will be expressed by obedience to all of God's commandments. For many of those commandments, of course, are about our mutual relationships within the fellowship of God's people.

You see, love is not just a warm emotion. It's not just a warm feeling of attraction or enjoyment with a particular person or people. Love is expressed through the will and action, through obedience to what God commands us to do.

And what John is saying here is not new also. Because Jesus has made this very point clear in, for example, John's Gospel. In chapter 13, Jesus says, a new commandment I give you, you love one another.

[13 : 36] And in the next two chapters, he makes it clear that how you express that love is through obedience to God's commandments. Jesus summarised the whole of God's law as love.

The beginning of our service today, we recall the words of Jesus when he said the two great commandments are love God and love each other. And Paul likewise, in Romans 13, for example, says that love fulfils the law.

What John then is saying is that our love for each other is given substance and content from the laws of God.

Indeed, from the truth of God and the truth of his gospel and its obligations. You see, love is not an airy, fairy idea. It's not devoid of content.

It's substantial because it derives from gospel truth. And what John is arguing here is that truth and love go together.

[14 : 40] They are inescapable obligations for Christian people. It's not a matter of one or the other or putting both together meaning each is compromised either.

They are mutually consistent. They are not contradictory or in opposition to each other. Truth and love go together. Both of them are commanded by God.

Both of them are exhorted here by John. Both of them are essential for Christian people. Both of them are to be walked in. Verse 4 says walk in truth. The end of verse 6 says walk in love.

That is, they are to be behavioural patterns for Christian people. And both of them are personal. They're relational. Just as Jesus Christ embodies truth, so walking in truth means relating to Jesus.

So too, of course, God is love and walking in love involves relating to God the Father. Truth without love becomes hard and cold and remote but love without truth becomes soppy sentimentality.

[15 : 46] Now why is John arguing this here? He's not just giving some sort of treatise about the nature of truth and love. Love. Like the rest of the Bible, it is eminently practical and it meets a particular situation.

John acknowledges now the situation and why truth and love together must be practised by Christian people. Verse 7 in the original Greek begins with the word because or for.

It's lost in our translation unfortunately. But what follows is the reason why he's talking about truth and love. The reason is that there are many deceivers who've gone out into the world.

This is a serious danger that the church is facing. The danger of false teachers in their midst. It's serious because there are many of them. It's not just one isolated person but there are many false teachers in John's day presumably going around itinerantly around the Mediterranean trying to mislead Christian churches and groups.

Indeed we may get a sense of the danger when we realise that there are many deceivers but in verse 4 he said some of you walk in the truth. You almost get the impression that the faithful ones are a minority.

[17 : 09] And he describes these false teachers as deceivers. That is they are subtle. They pretend to the truth but they mislead into falsehood.

They may look orthodox. They may use the right words but rather they are deceptive and misleading. Their particular error which is different from the one we saw in the letter to Jude over the last few weeks their particular error is that they do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

That is they deny that God has become a human being in Jesus Christ.

Again there may be a sense of subtlety here because John says they do not confess this. He doesn't say they confess that this is not the case. It seems to be that they've left unsaid an essential doctrine of Christian truth.

that is their error is as much what they don't say as what they do say. Now the theological term for this is the incarnation.

[18 : 27] When we talk about the incarnation of Jesus what we are meaning is that God himself has become a human being taken on flesh. That's I suppose it's Latin the incarnation carnal is from flesh.

the doctrine of the incarnation is that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine. Not a bit of each not in a mixture that compromises each and makes him less than human and less than divine but fully both.

And in every age from John's in the first century up to and including our own there are those who deny the real incarnation. of Jesus Christ that he's fully human and fully divine.

For some people over the centuries they think that human matter or physical matter is essentially evil. How could God be part of an evil substance or matter?

He can't really be then fully human. That some have suggested therefore that Jesus the person was fully human but God's spirit just sort of floated down to him at his baptism and just before he died on the cross left him so that of course God couldn't die and God's not fully a human being he's just indwelt Jesus for a particularly short period of time.

[19 : 56] When I was studying at Ridley College as a student we had groups of students that would meet from our college and Trinity College to discuss things and I remember one of the students contemporary with me at Trinity College believe that that Jesus was not fully divine that God's spirit just came down to him at his baptism as an adult and left him just before he died on the cross.

That student is now a bishop. Meteoric rise isn't it? For somebody who doesn't believe really in the full incarnation of Jesus Christ. Well maybe he's changed his views and let me say he's not a bishop in this diocese.

But others have argued over the centuries that Jesus is not fully human. Fully divine but he just looks as though he's human.

It's an appearance but it's not the full reality. In the word for these believers or the people who believe this in the early church history were docetists.

They were they follow what's called docetism from a Greek word meaning to seem or appear. Jesus seemed to be human but he wasn't really in the end.

[21 : 13] Yes he was a divine character but he wasn't really in the end fully human. There are various early church documents around that describe these errors.

A man called Sarinthus, some think John is actually writing against him personally here. was an exponent of such a view. Now some of you might be thinking does this really matter?

Is this just a trivial point of scholarly theology? theology? It does matter because if Jesus was not fully human and fully divine, in the end the whole edifice of Christianity falls in a heap.

You see such a heresy is not just a triviality, it's crucial because if he were not fully human and fully divine then the work of atonement is not effective.

He doesn't perfectly reconcile God and humanity together and so on. If Jesus were not fully human and fully divine, we are not saved and what we do here today is a complete waste of time.

- [22 : 36] Indeed, John's acknowledgement of what they were teaching is not just say that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, that he was God incarnate, but actually it's a present tense, that he still is.

You see, when Jesus rose from the dead and descended to heaven, he was still and is still fully human. this century we have made a great fuss of the fact that at last humanity has landed on the moon.

But 2,000 years ago humanity went to the throne of heaven, which I consider to be a much more remarkable thing, even if the television cameras didn't capture it. A good test of any statement of doctrine to see whether it's heretical or not is what does it say about Jesus Christ?

Is he fully God and fully human? Or is he not quite both? Does he offer full salvation?

Or do we need to contribute something to it? Is Jesus on the top rung of the ladder? Or is he perhaps one or two rungs down?

- [24 : 03] Anything that demotes Jesus, limits Jesus, or confuses his natures as being human and divine is heretical and wrong.

And it's not trivial. It's essential. It's why the Jehovah's Witnesses are wrong. It's why the Mormons are wrong. It's why other religions are wrong. It's not the truth, at this point at least, is found in those places.

It's not. And John's summary of his false teachers leads us in no doubt at all. Any such person, he says, is the deceiver and the antichrist.

You cannot get more damning in your assessment of somebody than that, even if they're words that are barely ever used false teachers. He says, today, as a result of that description, John has two exhortations.

Firstly, in verse 8, be on your guard. The exact words that Jesus used in Mark 13 about the same threat of false teaching. We cannot be complacent.

- [25 : 15] We must ever be vigilant. We must test what is said. by any Christian teacher, me included. Error is insidious and subtle.

We must pray for discernment and not walk after it. The danger is, if we're not on our guard, then we will lose what we have worked for.

Indeed, verse 8 says that the congregation will lose what John has laboured for, or the apostles have laboured for. That's the we in verse 8. John is saying that all the labours of those to bring people to faith will be lost if Christians follow falsehood rather than truth.

Failure to persevere will mean they forfeit the full reward of heaven. The end of verse 8. When I was 17, I went with a few friends for a week hiking across the Bogong High Plains, climbing Mount Feathertop and Mount Bogong.

On our second last day, some of us made the error of walking ahead, and the group split. And inadvertently, not only did it split in place, but on paths as well.

- [26 : 34] Those behind us followed a different path. And late in the afternoon, we realised that we had completely lost one other member of our group. The police were called for a search.

We were in the Herald, as it was then called. Although it all ended happily the next day, the member who'd got lost had slept in the open in his sleeping bag on a freezing cold mountain, and we were rescued on the backs of police motorbikes.

It was all very exciting. I'm glad that my mother didn't realise until I got home. The idea of going ahead, or running ahead, and getting lost, is behind verse 9.

John says, everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, that runs ahead of it, gets lost, or does not have God, loses God.

Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. John's description, I think, probably picks up ways in which these false teachers describe themselves. We've moved on from the basics that you're in.

[27 : 45] We've moved to more enlightened insights of scriptural truth. We've moved on to deeper things. We've run ahead of you who just hold the very basics. They're probably putting themselves across as people of superior insight, or intellect, or spiritual experience.

But nothing's changed, has it? Because that's how false teachers always, it seems, describe themselves. People who've moved beyond the basics into deeper and more enlightened and higher planes of truth.

One of the most shameful things of the Lambeth Conference last year, the conference of Anglican bishops worldwide that meets every ten years, were those who put themselves over as spiritually superior, who'd moved beyond the very basics, unlike the African and evangelical bishops who hold or held to the basic truths of scripture.

What nonsense they were saying. In part that was to advocate the ordination of practicing homosexual people. They'd moved far from the foundation of truth.

The foundation's been set. Jesus Christ, the prophets and the apostles are our foundation, and we cannot move beyond it or off it.

[29 : 10] We cannot move or run ahead of it. We must remain firm in it. That's what John is saying in verse 9, in effect. And remaining on that sure foundation is the only way to have God.

There are no two ways about it. There is one foundation and one alone for having a relationship with God. And John makes it clear that any who move beyond it, who run ahead of it, so to speak, will actually lose that relationship with God.

Well, John's second exhortation comes in verse 10. At first sight, it looks rather surprising given what he said about love. 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. In the ancient world, hospitality was more important than it is for us, probably.

They didn't have as many hotels and motels as we do. And certainly for itinerant preachers and teachers, to be put up in houses of other Christians was very important. We see the importance of hospitality in the Acts of the Apostles when Paul and his friends are travelling from place to place and are put up in different people's houses from time to time.

[30 : 32] Indeed, later on, at the end of the first century, a Christian document called the Didache gives rules of hospitality about putting up Christians or visiting itinerant Christian preachers.

The refusal of hospitality seems unloving. But we must remember that what John is speaking against is not just putting up a non-believer, any other sinner.

Jesus, we know, ate with sinners. That's a different issue. The people John is saying you must not show hospitality to are false teachers, people who are advocating publicly something that is untrue, something that is essential, essentially untrue.

People who are seeking to undermine and destroy Christian faith and the church. John is saying do not show hospitality to such people.

Do not give them an official welcome or greeting. That's why I think it was wrong of the cathedral to invite Bishop Spong to preach. Whether or not what he said in that particular sermon was orthodox or not, the very invitation, the offer of spiritual hospitality and greeting implies an acceptance and condoning of what he's published and said in the past.

[31 : 55] Now John's concern here is, as always, the preservation of faithful Christian people, the purity of the church. He's saying keep false teachers at a distance.

Doesn't mean hate them, love them, yes, but do not show them hospitality. Do not imply an acceptance of them. Love them, yes, but in the truth.

Maybe you have friends or family members even who publicly try to deride or undermine your Christian faith. It's a different thing from having friends or family who are just not believers but do not seek to criticise or undermine your faith.

I'd be surprised if there aren't a few of you who've got such friends or family members who use opportunities to ridicule what Christians believe. Do you protect yourself from them?

I don't mean do you have no contact with them but do you keep them at a distance but what about for your children or your grandchildren? Do you protect them, they who perhaps don't have the depth and discernment as adults do?

[33 : 11] Do you protect them from such false teachers who are your friends or family? John's two themes come together in this issue. Truth and love.

Love without truth is indiscriminating, it's blind and it's in the end deadly. The love that Christians are to share with each other must be discerning of truth.

But likewise our pursuit of truth must be in love of fellow Christians as well. Perhaps in our day the thing that is espoused is love and we are all too often ignorant or undiscerning of truth.

There are those who talk of love, what they mean is tolerance and what they practice is indifference to truth. Both must be pursued to the extreme.

Not one or the other. Not one at the expense of the other. Not either compromising the other. But both in full.

[34 : 23] Love and truth go together like a horse and carriage, though that of course doesn't rhyme. Let us make sure that we pursue both in our lives and let's pray that God helps us to do that.

O God, we pray that we may be marked by truth and love. In our relationship with you we pray that we may reflect the fact that Jesus is the truth and that you are the God who is love.

Lord, help us love each other in the truth. Help us walk in truth and walk in love.

And so keep us from error and heresy. So preserve us that we may receive our reward in full in heaven.

Amen.