



2 JOHN

Watch Yourself

“Watch yourselves that you do not lose what we have accomplished,
but that you may receive a full reward.”

2 John 8



A Commentary by Aaron Ferguson

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2 John

Watch Yourselves

Purpose

To warn the early church about *deceivers* and *antichrists* (false teachers)

Summary

John commends “the chosen lady” on the fact that her children “walk in truth,” meaning that they were obvious believers by the things that they said and did. He then followed his commendation with a warning, saying that it is good that they walk in truth because there are many deceivers in the world. John’s challenge to his readers was to identify and avoid those deceivers.

Penman

John, the disciple of Jesus

Recipients

The letter is addressed to “the chosen lady and her children.” It is unsure whether the chosen lady was an individual or a church or both (as churches met in a person’s home).

Date Written

Approx. 90 AD
from Ephesus

Key Verse

“Watch yourselves that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward.”

2 John 8

It is important to note that John is not instructing Christians to avoid unbelievers. Deceivers are not the same as unbelievers. We are commanded by Christ “to go into all the world and make disciples,” to befriend unbelievers and lead them to Jesus. However, we are to avoid deceivers. Deceivers are those who propose a different “gospel,” a different way to be saved. A false gospel is one that does not hold that Jesus was the God-man (i.e. Gnosticism, Mormonism, Islam, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc.). John calls proponents of false gospels “deceivers and antichrists,” those who “go too far,” and warns his readers not to extend hospitality to them. These people are not seekers looking to come to God but rather they are liars looking to lead people away from the one true God.

Themes

- **Love in Truth:** John points out that all Christians have a common bond because of the love they each have for the Lord. When God’s love Him with all of their hearts, then the naturally tendency is genuinely to love each other as well.
- **Deceivers:** The meat of this letter is a warning against those who would intentionally lead Christians astray and neutralize their effectiveness.

Leading Ideas

- Christians enjoy a unique fellowship because of their common bond in Christ (*1:1-3*).
- We demonstrate our love for God by obeying Him and loving others (*1:4-6*).
- Christians must be careful to protect themselves against false teachers (*1:7-11*).
- The best form of communication is to talk face to face (*1:12, 13*).

In Truth and Love

A Bond of Unity

¹“The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth, ²for the sake of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever: ³Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.”

Bond of Unity

John 17:23

Ephesians 4:3, 13

Colossians 3:14

Leading Idea

Christians enjoy a unique fellowship because of their common bond in Christ.

In this letter, the Apostle John describes himself as “the elder” (v.1). He may be referring to his age, since he is one of the last surviving disciples of Christ. He may also be referring to his position of authority in the early church, a beloved shepherd or overseer. Either interpretation would be correct.

However, the recipient of this letter – “the chosen lady and her children” – is unknown. The majority of scholars believe that John is writing to an individual and her family, while some think that the letter is addressed to a church and its members. The Church (the elect or chosen) is called the Bride of Christ (lady) in the New Testament, and followers of Christ are called “children of God.” Neither choice (individual or church) is wrong here, for the message remains the same.

In light of 3 John, which is a letter specifically addressed to an individual (v.1, Gaius), I tend to lean towards the recipients of 2 John being a church and its members, because of its anonymity, the fact that it’s addressed to the “chosen” or “elect,” and the reference to another “sister with children” (v.13). However, when John refers to “your house” (v.10), he certainly could be talking to an individual, although most of the early churches met in someone’s house, so then, John could be talking to both an individual and a church. Who knows?

Whoever the recipients of this letter were, John expresses his love for them, “love in truth” (v.1). The “truth” here refers to Christ and/or the Spirit, “for the truth abides in us,” John writes (v.2). In essence, because of the love for Christ that all true believers possess, they have a common bond between them, and they sincerely love each other through that connection. The bond of Christ is divinely powerful to produce unity among believers, who may not even know each other. Because of our love for the Lord, we are “attracted” to others who love the Lord (like the bond between two Americans running into each other in a foreign country). As Christians, we can openly fellowship with other Christians, even though they may be complete strangers, simply because we both harbor a genuine love for the Savior. The Holy Spirit in one believer enjoys the company of the Holy Spirit in another believer, because the Spirit is one and the same.

As John closes his salutation (v.3), he lists three of the many benefits that we enjoy “for the sake of,” or because of, the truth in Christ – grace, mercy, and peace. Grace is an undeserved favor given to those who deserve the opposite; as sinners, we did not deserve God’s favor or love, but He gave it anyway when He sent Jesus to redeem us (*Romans 5:8*). Mercy is a pity expressed to those who are guilty, or to withhold due punishment; again, as sinners, we deserve eternal separation from God, but in His great love, He extended mercy to us (*Romans 6:23*). Peace is a state of freedom, in which a person experiences quiet and rest; because of Christ’s mediation, our sin has been removed from our relationship with God, and we now enjoy peace with Him. We can also enjoy peace with others.

I find it fascinating that John uses the word “truth” four times in the first three verses (and a fifth time in the next verse). In my mind, John was affirming (and reaffirming) the fact that Jesus was real (He is *the Truth*) and the faith that Christians have in Him is real and well-placed. Jesus *is* the only God of heaven and earth, His message of eternal life *is* genuine, and our trust in Him *is* well-founded and secure. In the whacky world in which we live, so many voices distract and influence us; they beckon us to listen to them and follow them, because they have the “answers.” Nevertheless, there is only one truth worthy to be heard and followed – the truth of Jesus Christ. May we have confidence in the Truth and genuinely love those who are friends and family in the Truth.

Walking in Truth

A Life of Love and Obedience

⁴“I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth, just as we have received commandment to do from the Father. ⁵Now I ask you, lady, not as though I were writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning, that we love one another. ⁶And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.”

Commanded to Love

John 13:34, 35
John 15:12, 17
Romans 13:8-10
James 2:8
1 John 3:16; 4:7,8

Leading Idea

We demonstrate our love for God by obeying Him and loving others.

Much of this letter (2 John) is a repeat of John’s previous letter (1 John). The same message that he expounds on in detail there, he summarizes here. It may be that this person or church was familiar with his first letter, and, thus, the second letter was just a reminder of some of his key points.

John begins with a commendation: “I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth.” We know that John has not seen the recipient of this letter face to face (v.12), so how he knew that these “children” were walking in the truth is unknown. Perhaps some of them visited John, or he saw them in another location. Either way, a conversation must have taken place, so that John knew where these “children” were from. He was impressed with what he saw.

It is noteworthy that John recognized that these people were “walking in truth.” In other words, they were obvious to John by the words they said and the things they did. The people of God *should* stand out from others; we are expected to be different from those of the world. *Christianity is more than just a belief; it is a lifestyle.* Being a follower of Christ is about more than just being convinced in one’s heart or mind that Jesus is the truth; it is living that truth in front of others through what we say and do. *Christ does change us internally, but that change should be evident externally.* Others should see the difference that Christ has made, and is making, in our lives. We are to live our lives in such a way as Christ would be pleased; that’s what it means to “walk in the truth.”

Now, John reminds his readers of two truths of love, both of which he explains in detail in his first letter (1 John). The first truth is that *Christians demonstrate their love for God by obeying His commands.* It is hypocritical to verbalize a love for God and yet neglect to comply with the Word of God. Do children truly love their parents if they ignore or refuse to obey their instructions? The second truth is that *Christians demonstrate their love for Christ by loving others.* John refers to the “commandment that we have heard from the beginning,” which is not the beginning of time but rather the beginning of Christ’s ministry. Christ demonstrated love for others, so as His disciples, we too are expected to follow in His steps and love people. Remember, God is love, and if we truly have the Spirit of God in us, then we will not be able to contain our love for those around us.

Therefore, “to walk in the truth” is to love God (through obedience) and love others. It is interesting that this was Jesus’ response when asked what the greatest commandments were – to love God and love others (Mark 12:30, 31). That is Christianity in a nutshell. If all believers “walked in the truth,” we would effectively impact the world around us.

⁷“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸Watch yourselves, (so) that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that [you] may receive a full reward. ⁹Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; ¹¹for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.”

Beware of False Teachers
Matthew 7:6, 15
Matthew 24:11
Romans 16:17
Galatians 1:8
2 Peter 2:1
1 John 4:1

Those Who Go Too Far

Dealing with False Teachers

Leading Idea

Christians must be careful to protect themselves against false teachers.

Here we have the heart of John’s second letter (v.7-11), his instruction regarding false teachers. It hinges on the previous verses in which he explained the importance of “walking in truth.” In essence, John was saying that believers in Christ should be obvious by their words and deeds, because there are many deceivers in the world. Sometimes, it can be difficult to tell the two of them apart.

John provides a definition for a deceiver: “one who does not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (v.7). Then, he uses another name for deceivers – “antichrists.” This is not a reference to *the* Antichrist, that final world ruler who will reign in the power of Satan, but rather it is a reference to the hordes of people who deny that Jesus was God in human form. While John is referring to the Gnostics of his day (see notes on Gnostics in *1 John 4:1-3*), he would include a longer list in our modern culture (i.e. Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Unitarians, Universalists, New Agers, Christian Scientists, the Emergent Church, the Health and Wealth Movement, Name It and Claim It Preachers, Muslims, and many more). Anyone who is not for Christ, as being God’s Son coming in the flesh, is against Christ and should be avoided.

John, then, issues a strong warning to his readers (v.8), pleading with them to watch themselves carefully, so that they would not lose what had been accomplished. Young, immature believers are easily distracted and derailed by erroneous doctrine; thus, John is concerned that the foundation that he and others laid would be destroyed by these false teachers. If the early church followed after these deceivers and forfeited all that John had invested, his work would have been in vain.

Note, there is a discrepancy here in the translations regarding those who may lose their rewards to the deceivers (v.8). Some versions use the word “we,” as in John may lose his reward, while other versions use the word “you,” as in believers may lose their reward. I’m not sure why there is a problem with identifying the correct translation here, but it makes sense, in light of the warning, that John would stand to lose his reward; for he would not get to see the seeds that he planted come to fruition. They would have been stolen away by the enemy.

Next, John addresses a situation that must have been taking place; believers were inviting false teachers into their homes or churches (v.10). First, he gives the standard for identifying deceivers – “those who go too far and do not abide in the teaching of Christ” (v.9) – then, he says that once they have been identified, they should be kept away from God’s people. In essence, false teachers are wolves in sheep’s clothing and should be kept away from the Flock.

This command raises an interesting question in my mind. If we are to befriend unbelievers, in order to share the Gospel with them, how is it that John instructs us to shun them? Where is the line between actively sharing your faith and jealously protecting it?

What must be pointed out here is the difference between an unbeliever and a false teacher. Unbelievers are lost sheep that need (and want) to be rescued and brought into the fold, while *false teachers are thieves looking to steal sheep that are already in the fold*. Why would we invite a well-known thief into our home? John’s command is not a contradiction to the Great Commission, in which we are to go and make disciples, but rather it is a warning against those who wish to do us harm. False teachers are intentional in causing damage to the Christian faith; we must protect ourselves against their kind. For a Christian or church to invite a false teacher into their home or sanctuary and to provide him with the opportunity to deceive believers is foolish. Besides, we don’t want to be guilty of aiding their “ministry of deception” with our encouragement.

¹²“Though I have many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink; but, I hope to come to you and speak face to face, so that (your) joy made be made full.¹³The children of your chosen sister greet you.”

Face to Face

Clear Communication

Leading Idea

The best form of communication is to talk face to face.

Here we have the ending of John’s second letter. Though he is wrapping up his thoughts, John says some significant things that should be pointed out.

First, John admits that he has much more to say to his readers, but he says that he would rather tell them himself than to write it out in a letter (v.12). While it may seem like a trivial thought, there is actually great wisdom here, for *many good intentions have been mangled by miscommunication*.

When communicating with others, four basic methods may be employed:

- The first method of communication is to *relay a message through someone else*. This method is, by far, the worst form of communication and should be used sparingly. First, finding someone you trust to relay your message with the detail and spirit that you would is tricky business; furthermore, the odds of your message coming out exactly the way you intended is rare in these cases. Use this method only if other means are not available, and, even then, be as concise and careful as possible to avoid misunderstanding.
- The second method of communication is to *write or type a message*. While this method is far better than the first, it is still insufficient in many ways. In today’s modern world, we no longer resort to long hand-written letters, but rather we make use of E-mail, memos, or, even worse, texting. Our messages have gotten shorter and our communication less effective. While written messages are convenient, they still lack key elements, that being tone of voice, facial expression, attitude, and clarity. While the writer may mean one thing, the reader hears or believes another and misunderstands, or he is offended or hurt. My advice is to use written messages only for communicating information; when needing to communicate anything personal (feelings, convictions, beliefs, advice, etc.), use one of the next two methods.
- The third method of communication is to *speak to someone by phone*. While speaking over the phone is better than the first two methods, it is still not the best form of communication. However, in a phone conversation, one can convey tone of voice, attitude, and clarity; however, facial expressions and body language are still missing from the equation. The problem with speaking by phone is that it is usually inconvenient. It takes time to align people’s schedules and it takes more time to communicate, but in the end, phone conversations are so much more meaningful and productive than hand-written messages.
- The fourth and best method of communication is to *talk face to face*. Simply put, there is no substitute for meeting in person. While it takes the most time and is the least convenient, it is the most effective.

Note, there is a discrepancy in translations over whose “joy will be made full” (v.12). Some translations use the words “your joy,” meaning the joy of the readers, while other translations use the words “our joy,” referring to John and his associates. I’m not sure why we are not able to identify which word is being used here, but it makes sense to me that John is suggesting that his joy would be made full by visiting. The expression “that our joy may be made full” might be said this way today: “I would like nothing better than to come and see you. That would make me very happy.”

John closes his letter with a greeting from the “chosen sister.” While this may be an individual, it makes more sense to be another church of chosen or elect believers.