

This is Love

2 John

October 31, 2010

As I was preparing for the series we just finished on first John, I was struck by one of the commentary's statement that second and third John are two of the most neglected books in the Bible. They are both short, with third John being the shortest book in the Bible, and they deal with topics which are addressed elsewhere, sometimes in greater depth, yet they have something to share and are worth taking a look at.

First, we do not know in what order these letters were written. There is nothing in them or in their histories that tells us which is the first and which is the last. They got their names, "First", "Second", and "Third", from the order in which they were included in the New Testament. It has more to do with length than it does with how old they are. It might be more accurate to call them, "Longest", "Short", and "Shortest". As an aside, I know some of you have looked ahead and noted already that 3 John has one more verse than 2 John. The key here, however is word count in Greek. As written by John, 3 John has fewer words than 2 John, making it the shorter of the two. Since 2 and 3 John may have been written earlier, 1 John may be more of an unpacking and expansion of the truths taught in them.

Second, these two letters give us a view into John's heart and what he thought was most important to share when he only had a little time. What was the driving force behind John's teaching? Clearly we know it is the teaching of Jesus Christ, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but as John was led by God, what did he

consider the most important things for the church to know and to do? If he was only to have a short space in which to write, what was the thing he was going to say?

Now, we know that 2 John is short, not because John could not write more, but that he didn't want to. He was hoping to see the church soon. He wanted to meet with them, enjoy their company, and talk with them face to face. This is part of the reason he kept the letter short. He did not want to get into things in it which he would rather discuss with them around a dinner table.

So, to whom was this letter written? John addressed it, "*To the chosen lady and her children.*" (v.1) I love this address. We could spend a whole week just on these first few verses, and a month on the letter. John's address is a reminder that the church is more than just a group of people who have gotten together because we like each other and we think having meetings is fun. Just in these first few words we learn a lot about how John views the church.

First, we are the **chosen**. This is significant. Time and again we are reminded in scripture that we do not choose God. He chooses us. When we call out to Him in faith it is because He has already turned our hearts toward Him and poured out His grace on us. The church is the company of the chosen.

Second, John calls the gathered community of those chosen by God, "**lady**." It calls to mind the images of God's people as His bride. On Wednesday evening we have been looking at the prophet Hosea who was commanded by God to marry a prostitute as an image of God's relationship with His unfaithful people. God has

often used marriage to describe how He wants to relate to the people He has chosen and called.

The letter is not to the “lady” only, but also to her children. The message of God is not only for the church as a whole, but it is for the individual believer as well. What we are called to do and believe as a group, we are called to do and believe as individuals. Personal faith and holiness are important, just as it is important for churches to act in faithful ways and to be holy.

John further clarifies the recipients as those he and all who know the truth love in the truth. Love and truth are very important to John, just as they are important to Jesus. When John thought of the truth he thought, first and foremost, of Jesus. The Truth is a person who lived among us, and now lives in all who are saved and will be with them forever.

John assumes that the people reading this letter are **saved**. He assumes they have been chosen by God, and have submitted their minds and their lives to God’s truth and will. Anyone who is not submitted to God has no part in God’s commands or promises. Anybody who is not obedient has no claim on God’s blessings. By saying that the truth is in “us” and will be with “us” forever, John tells us that this letter is meant for those who, like him, know Jesus and are committed to Him more than anything or anyone else.

Once into the meat of the letter, John writes, *“It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded 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.” (vv.4-6) This is the heart of John’s letter. He has learned that some of the members of the church are living faithful lives. They are walking—living and growing—in knowledge of Jesus and obedience to Jesus’ commands. This is the will of God, and what God the Father commanded both in the Old Testament and also through Jesus. John probably learned of the faithful lives of these people when they came to visit him and he spent time talking with them about their lives and the church. In saying that some of the church walking in truth John was not implying that the rest didn’t. He was only stating that for which he had evidence. He knew at least some of them were, and it gave him great joy and hope that the rest were as well.

Having mentioned that they were walking in the truth, John went on to remind us of the height of that truth. All of God’s truth is important, but it is best summed up in love for Him and love for each other. Having rejoiced in their love for God as expressed in their walking in the truth, John reminded them to continue in love for each other as well. As Jesus said, the **church** is to be marked by our caring concern for one another and how we share our lives and our selves and watch over each other, not only for physical needs, but for spiritual needs as well.

John also followed Jesus in his definition of love. We always say that **love** is not an emotion, but a way of living, a pattern of behavior. Jesus defined love for Him in terms of obedience to Him. John reminds us of that here. We love Jesus and each other best when we obey

God's commands and live holy lives that are pleasing to Him. We cannot say we love God or that we really love each other, if we are not living in obedience to God. We may have a certain affection for who we want God to be or for each other, but we cannot love as God means us to if we are not faithful to His call on our lives.

Right on the heels of reminding us that love is obedience to God, John also reminds us that God has commanded us to love one another. This seems a bit circular. We were reminded yesterday during the leadership training that we cannot refer to a word in its own definition, yet this seems to be exactly what John is doing. Rather than calling it circular, it may be more helpful to see it as cyclical. It is an issue of growth. Our behavior is not to be static. The ways in which we relate to God and to one another are meant to grow and change over time as we mature in love for God and one another. Not only are we to treat each other well, we are to treat each other better than we did last year. Not only are we to obey God, we are to be more faithful and obedient than we were five years ago. Our lives are to be marked by **growth** in love. Just as a plant has a small amount of energy to produce a tiny leaf, which provides more energy to grow a larger leaf, which provides more energy to grow a still larger leaf, our lifestyle of love, of obedience to God, grows our hearts and spirits to spur us on to greater love, which makes room in us for more obedience, and the cycle continues until we are taken from this world of sin and find ourselves in the presence of the One who started the whole thing in us when He chose us for Himself.

After reminding us that love is obedience to God's commands and that God has commanded us to love one another, John turned to another issue in the church—false teaching.

Our society is based on the idea of tolerance. In the United States each person is free to worship God, or not, as he or she sees fit. That is one of the things that is exceptional about this nation, and our commitment to this principle from the start is one of the reasons faith is stronger here than in most of the rest of the Western European culture we largely share.

This same open-minded tolerance is not, however to be found in the church. From the perspective of someone steeped in our cultural tolerance, God's word dedicates a huge amount of space to carefully defining the truth, warning against allowing incorrect teaching in the church, and condemning those who would teach something other than the truth God has revealed. It is certainly true that our beliefs are interpretations of the text, but we are to work hard to make sure that we are properly and correctly interpreting it.

This is why our church covenant, and through it our church constitution, calls on us to be corrected by the church when she acts and speaks according to God's word. Not only is the church *not* called to accept anybody and any belief, we are strongly commanded to **reject** false teaching and remove anyone who teaches anything other than the truth.

John is not tolerant of people who do not hold the truth about Jesus. He uses the same terms for them that are elsewhere used for Satan, because their effect on the church is the same. If we do not believe right we cannot

behave right. If we do not behave right we cannot love right. If we cannot love right we are not in God and we are not a church. This is how great the stakes are and why it is so vital that we hold to the truth, reject any teaching that is not in keeping with the truth, and reject any person who insists on teaching what is not true.

There are two things about this rejection we need to note. First, we must be careful we do not **lose** what we have worked for. We move into greater disobedience and out of love for God and each other as we begin to believe things that are not true. If we believe lies we are not fully submitted to the one Who is the Truth. If we are moving away from the truth we are not held by it. We are therefore in danger of losing the reward for faithfulness. We might not lose our salvation, but we will certainly be less useful to God and the fruit He seeks to grow in us and through us will be severely limited.

The second thing we need to note about rejecting false teaching is that false teaching sometimes involves running **ahead**. Jesus taught to wait on God and follow the teaching and lead of the Holy Spirit. We are to be guided by God in all we do, and not go running off to do what we think is best. When a church starts to do what they think is right without first testing it by the word of God and prayer, we can go wrong even in trying to do good. Running ahead of God is just as bad as any other disobedience. Neither is following Him.

This rejection of false teaching and false teachers is to be **total**. Not only are the teachers not to be welcome in the church, but they are not even to be welcome in our homes. Look again at what John wrote, *“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this*

teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.” (vv.10,11) This is a remarkable statement given the importance of hospitality in John’s culture. This command to not even welcome false teachers in their homes would have gone against what the first readers of this letter had been taught all their lives. It is that important that we work to keep the church free of deceit and false teaching. It is that important that we work for purity in life, in teaching, and in love for each other. It is that important that we submit to God’s word and to each other as we are called to grow in love.

As we said at the beginning, John had more he wanted to say, but he wanted to say it in person. Perhaps he did write another letter. It could very well be the one we have been looking at the last several weeks. His point was that He wanted to be in relationship with them, to take greetings from the church where he was, and to have the opportunity to help them grow. We too, are called to help one another grow in our **relationships**—in our love for God and for each other. As we do, our joy will be made complete in Him.