

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Truth and Love**

2 John 1-13

Several years ago, one of the major internet search engines compiled a top 10 list of the words that web searchers wanted to define. The list included terms like “culture,” “ethics,” “plagiarism,” and “leadership.” But at the top of the list was “veracity,” in other words, “truth.” And second on the list was “love.” The report concluded by noting that “many of us are still trying to find meaning for some of life’s littlest big words.”<sup>1</sup>

“Truth” and “Love” are two of life’s biggest words, with big implications. How we define them, and how we practice those definitions in our everyday relationships, shape our lives and the lives of others. The writer in today’s text from 2 John knew this. After hearing the first two verses of the letter, it’s clear that truth and love are top priorities for the person who sent this letter and the congregation that received it.

We’re not given the name of the letter’s author. He simply identifies himself as “the elder” (v. 1). Literally, the word means someone who is old, which indicates that he has lots of experience and wisdom, and probably holds some position of authority. The church’s members trust him and respect him.

The elder addresses the congregation with an interesting metaphor. He calls them “the chosen lady and her children” (v. 1), which is essentially another way of saying “the church and its members.” By speaking of them as “chosen,” the author may be echoing John 15:16, where Jesus says, “You did not choose me but I chose you....” They’re not primarily a self-generated religious organization but a fellowship of people called together by Christ. They owe their existence as a congregation to him. They’re a family, a tight-knit group of children birthed by the grace of God.

After reminding this church of who they are, the elder gets down to business. From the outset, there’s no mistaking two critical subjects that he wants to cover—truth and love. “To the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth—and not only I, but also all who know the truth—because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, will be with us in truth and love” (vv. 2-3).

Truth and love. These aren’t just literary themes or theological abstractions. For the church, then and now, they’re living realities. Truth isn’t just a philosophical presentation of how the world, and life in it, work. Truth isn’t a set of principles by which to interpret our everyday experiences. Truth goes beyond just a list of the primary characteristics of God. Truth, for the community of Christ’s people, is Jesus himself. God didn’t reveal himself to us and save us by sending us a theological essay. He saved us by sending the Son, by showing up himself in flesh and blood. This is truth.

That’s why, about halfway into his brief letter, the elder warns the church’s members not to fall into the same error as some who have already left the congregation. Their belief and teaching was striking at the root of Christian faith, putting the identity of Jesus Christ at risk. They were undermining faith in the true and full humanity of Christ. They were

creating fractures in the congregation's fellowship and disobeying the command to love. It was better that these folks be shown the church exit.

In another letter we call 1 John, the elder began by saying, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us" (1:1-2). It was as the one who became flesh that Jesus revealed the glory of God. It was as the one who became flesh that Jesus gave his life for the world. It was as the one who became flesh that Jesus modeled the life of obedience to God and love of others. This is the essence of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. He handed himself over to death so that we may have life. This is truth.

Theologian John Franke has written:

Truth is not finally to be found in abstract notions or theories, but rather in the person of Jesus Christ, the unique Son of God and the living embodiment of truth. From this perspective, knowing truth depends on being in proper relationship to this one person who is divine truth. Jesus is categorically different from all other prophets, witnesses, and messengers from God. Jesus is all of these things, yet more. Along with the Father and the Spirit, Jesus himself is God.<sup>2</sup>

I like the way that Franke highlights not only the importance of what we believe but also the necessity of living in relationship with Jesus, the embodiment of truth. This means that faith can't be reduced to a checklist of affirmations about the identity of Jesus. Instead, faith is a living fellowship, a vibrant union that you have with Christ and with the community of Christ's people. Within that fellowship, the grace and power of God operate, and truth, rather than being a set of ideas, becomes an atmosphere in which Christians live, a reality that we inhabit.

And the primary characteristic of that reality is love. According to the elder, love is basically a matter of "walking in the truth" (v. 4). If truth is a matter of God, embodied in Jesus, who gives himself for the world to secure our forgiveness and rescue us from death, then God's love is the reality in which we live. "For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16). And a life aligned with that reality, a life determined by that reality, will be a life of love.

In one respect, as the elder himself says, this is nothing new. "I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning" (v. 5). In other words, from the time you heard the gospel and came to faith in Jesus Christ, you've known that experiencing God's love entails loving others. Love of God and love of others, especially fellow members of God's family, the church, are inseparable. As the elder said in 1 John, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters" (3:16). So we can't speak of one without speaking of the other. In fact, the extent to which we believe that Jesus gave himself to us will become evident in how we give ourselves to one another. This is the heart of Christian love. This is what we're commanded to do.

At first glance, that may strike us as an odd. After all, how can love be a matter of law? Why should love be commanded? Shouldn't love be something that's freely chosen and freely practiced? Shouldn't love of God and love of others be something that happens spontaneously and voluntarily?

But that way of looking at it hinges on a faulty understanding of our human capacity to love. True, we human beings are capable of loving. But what if we only love when we feel like it? Or what if we only love when it seems to come naturally to us? What if we love based

solely on our own instincts? The fact is, in order to form solid fellowship and lasting community, we need to be commanded to love. We need to be instructed by God to love our neighbor. Especially in situations where love for another person is hard, painful, or seemingly impossible, we need to remember that love really is a matter of being obedient to what God teaches us. Not obedience that flows from our own determination and willpower, but obedience that comes from having Christ dwelling in us.

Remember that the Son has been sent to us in order to bring us into the communion and intimacy that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share with one another. God's very nature is relational. We can't know reality, the truth, apart from relationship with God. And we can't walk in the truth apart from relationship with God. We can't love the way God intends us to love apart from being connected to God and having his power at work in us. Otherwise, love becomes just a human thing, something that we come up with on our own.

In his book, *Love: A History*, Simon May calls human love our "new god." The book includes a chapter titled, "Love Plays God," in which May writes, "Human love . . . is now tasked with achieving what once only divine love was thought capable of: to be our ultimate source of meaning and happiness." He goes on to lay out some of the core beliefs for this new "religion of love":

- Human love is the universal form of salvation available to all of us.
- We don't need "long and disciplined training" to learn how to love because most of us can love spontaneously and without effort.
- Human love is always benevolent and harmonious—a haven of peace.
- Human love transports us beyond the messy imperfections of the everyday world into a superior state of purity and perfection.
- Human love delivers us from all of life's losses and sufferings.

May writes, "These sorts of ideas saturate popular culture . . . To its immense cost, human love has usurped a role that only God's love used to play."<sup>3</sup>

As the elder reminds us, our fundamental confession isn't "love is god" but "God is love" (1 John 4:8). That's our three-word summation of truth. But we have to flesh that out, because God has fleshed it out. "... he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

One preacher tells the story about a popular monk during the Middle Ages who announced that in the cathedral that evening he would preach a sermon on the love of God. As the people gathered and stood in silence, waiting for the service to begin, sunlight streamed through the beautiful windows. When the last bit of color had faded from the windows, the old monk went to the candelabrum, took a lighted candle, and walked over to the life-size statue on the cross. He held the light beneath the wounds on Jesus' feet, then his hands, then his side. Then, still without a word, he let the light shine on Jesus' thorn-crowned brow. That was his sermon. The people stood in silence and wept.<sup>4</sup>

Truth and love, in the flesh, in Jesus. In the marketplace of contemporary culture, where there are so many versions of truth, and so many descriptions of love, on offer, this is the word of life that we proclaim, the word of life that we display by our love for one another.

<sup>1</sup> "Searching for Meaning." Yahoo! <http://buzz.yahoo.com/> (December 3, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> John Franke, "Still the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Christianity Today. December 4, 2009. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/december/6.27.html> (February 9, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> J. Wallace Hamilton, "The Love of God," in *Interpreting Ephesians for Preaching and Teaching*, ed. Scott Nash (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1996) 81.