

When Love Says No

2 John 1:1-13

Introduction

Parent Persuasion: When I was a kid, I had a process for getting what I wanted. The best-case scenario was asking Dad first. He would often say “yes” without thinking. Can I spend the night at my friend’s house? Can I eat this ice cream before bed? Can I borrow this lighter for an experiment? If I made the strategic error of asking my Mom first and she said “no,” I always had the appeals process of asking Dad.

- We have this natural instinct that “yes” = loving and “no” = mean.
- We assume that “being loving” is the same thing as “being nice,” and you can’t be too loving, right? More is always better. After all, “All You Need Is Love” (Beatles).

Too Loving? Can you be too loving? *Not as rightly defined*, but in its popular form, yes.

- Can you be too generous? *If your kids don’t eat.* Too trusting? *That’s not really a Nigerian prince who sent you that email.* Too honest? At least too vulnerable. *There are things you tell your spouse that you shouldn’t tell your SEPTA seatmate.*

Postcard Epistles: 2 and 3 John are the two shortest books in the NT. Both have approximately 300 words in English.¹ They would have been written on a single sheet of papyrus (maybe 8 x 10 inches).² Hence they are often called **postcard epistles**.

- Both circle the same theological themes as 1 John but address a specific situation. They are quick, targeted, personal notes addressing a specific problem. John basically ends by saying, I have much more to say, but I’ll save it until we’re face to face.
- In 2 John, there is a strange command: do not receive [this person] into your house or give him any greeting (v. 10).
 - This can seem out of character for John the “love one another” guy. He spent an entire letter telling us that if we don’t love our brother, we don’t know God. Now he’s saying, don’t even let this guy in your house or say “hello” to him.
 - **Apparently, sometimes love says no.**
 - There’s an underlying question that we will answer: *How can refusing someone actually be loving?*
- The loving thing is not always the “nicest” thing. If you always say “yes,” you will eventually destroy yourself or someone else.³ Just because you *can* say “yes” to everything doesn’t mean you *should*.
 - “Some desires don’t need to be satisfied; they need to be crucified” (Smith). Saying yes to the right things leads to life, and saying no to the wrong things protects you from destruction.

¹ Greek: 2 John (245), 3 John (219).

² See Metzger, *The Text of the NT*

³ If you never deny yourself, you will destroy yourself (e.g., Jim Carrey’s *Yes Man* and Jennifer Garner’s *Yes Day*; just because you can say yes to everything doesn’t mean you should; “some desires don’t need to be satisfied, they need to be crucified”; say yes to what truly matters and leads to life).

Point: Because the letter is so short, we can see the themes maybe even more clearly than a longer writing. 6 simple words show up more than any others: truth (5x), love (4x), commandment (4x), walk (3x), teaching (3x), children (3x).

- Together, we can see the quick reminders John gives and how they build on each other.
 - Continue in the truth, love one another, and guard against false teachers.
 - Truth → Love → Discernment
- **Truth produces and protects godly love.** To walk in love, we must walk in truth.
 - (1) Let the truth lead you (vv. 1-4)
 - (2) Let love move you (vv. 5-6)
 - (3) Let discernment guard you (vv. 7-13)

¹ The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth, ² because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever: ³ Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love. ⁴ I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. ⁵ And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another. ⁶ And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. ⁷ For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸ Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. ⁹ Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. ¹² Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete. ¹³ The children of your elect sister greet you.

*You read a whole book of the Bible today. 😊

1. Let Truth Lead You (vv. 1-4)

Greeting: ¹ The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth,

- This is like the “Dear church” part of the letter. It tells you who it is from and who it is to.
 - It's **from** “The elder.”⁴ So it is “formally anonymous,” but they all knew who was writing it. Elder *can* mean simply someone who is “mature,” but it also is a description of the *role* of pastor (emphasizing the mature and godly leader of a church).⁵

⁴ πρεσβύτερος

⁵ So I exhort the **elders** among you, as a fellow **elder** and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: **shepherd** the flock of God that is among you, exercising **oversight**, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you (1 Pet 5:1-2). See also Acts 20 where elders (v. 17) are called overseers (v. 28) and are told to watch over the flock, i.e., pastor (v. 28-29).

- I don't think this makes this an impersonal letter simply because he uses titles rather than names, because he ends it with a very personal and affectionate description. I think the term elder highlights his personal care and deep concern for them.
- I kind of like the way Greek letters are written, they tell you who is writing from the beginning (we have to scan to the bottom to figure it out). It's like in Spanish how the question mark is at the beginning and end of the sentence, so you know it's a question immediately. Ever started reading a sentence and realize it's a question to late?
- I.e., "From your pastor."
- It's **to** the elect lady and her children. "Elect lady" is a way of saying "local church."⁶ We often see how Christians are described as God's elect, his chosen.⁷ Her children are the believers who belong to that church.

Truth Defines Love: whom I love in truth,

- When he says he "loves" them "in truth," he is not simply saying that he loves them "genuinely or sincerely" (though he certainly does),⁸ but he is explaining that he loves them as a fellow believer because they share the truth of Jesus Christ.
 - and not only I, but also all who know the truth (v. 1)
 - because of the truth that abides⁹ in us and will be with us forever (v. 2)
 - Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love (v. 3)¹⁰
- Our unity can never simply be in a generic coexistence, but is always rooted in the **truth** of God's **love** for us in Christ.
 - A gospel community on mission means that the gospel is the ground of our community and provides the content and parameters of our mission.
 - "If we are Christians, we are to love our neighbors and even our enemies; but we are bound to our fellow Christians by the special bond of truth" (Stott).
 - "The fellowship of the local truth is created by truth and exhibited by love" (Stott).

Twin Themes: The driving themes of John's letters are **truth** and **love**. Christlike character is always uncompromising in truth and overflowing with love.

- Truth and love are two sides of the same coin. "Truth without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic" (MLK Jr, modified).
 - Truth without love = harsh
 - Love without truth = empty

⁶ Think about how the church is a "lady" (i.e. bride). Lady (κυρία) is feminine of lord.

⁷ Cf. 1 Pet 1:1

⁸ Cf. 1 Pet 1:22

⁹ μένουσαν

¹⁰ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ καὶ ἀγάπῃ

- The middle is hard: truth and love,¹¹ justice and grace,¹² childlike and mature,¹³ shrewd as a serpent and gentle as a dove.¹⁴
 - Holding the high ground is hard. There is a slippery slope on both sides of the mountain.
 - I'm not arguing that we live in some squishy middle, afraid to obey the commands of Christ, but a full-throated commitment to both the anchor of truth and the way of love.
- Paul tells us to "[speak] the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). We are to be truthful people.¹⁵ Which is to be loving! You don't really **love** someone if you won't tell them the **truth** (e.g., bald, fly unzipped, cure to a disease).

From God:³ Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.

- This reality of being loving and truthful, of standing firm in the unwavering truth of God's commands while never giving an inch to arrogance, demeaning, or jealousy, is only possible as a transformative gift of our Triune God.¹⁶
 - He is the cause and giver of the grace, mercy, and peace we need.¹⁷ His indwelling presence makes this impossible command a miraculous possibility.
- Verse three is the end of the intro but its themes transition perfectly into the body of this brief letter.¹⁸

Walking in Truth⁴ I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father.

- John's **great**¹⁹ joy is that he has encountered members of this church walking in the truth.²⁰
- They haven't just *heard* the truth, or *agreed* with the truth, they are walking in it, they are living it out.
- The truth of the gospel is not meant to simply inform our doctrine but to **transform** our lives.
- One of the most exhausting experiences as a preacher is to watch people cheer on your sermons, soak up Bible Study, but continue to walk in sin.
 - Paul would say you're lying if you claim to be one of **God's chosen** but are still nursing a grudge, or harboring sexual immorality.²¹
- The most joyful moments of discipleship are when someone not only hears the word of God but it changes the way they walk.²²

¹¹ Eph 4:15

¹² Mic 6:8

¹³ Cf. Matt 18:3-4 and 1 Cor 14:20

¹⁴ Matt 10:16

¹⁵ Eph 4:15 - ἀληθεύοντες

¹⁶ Notice it is from both Father and Son equally (because they are equal).

¹⁷ χάρις ἔλεος εἰρήνη

¹⁸ New section (untranslated ὅτι)

¹⁹ λίαν

²⁰ περιπατοῦντας ἐν ἀληθείᾳ

²¹ Colossians 3:5-17

²² E.g., Jas 1:19-27

- When was the last time the commands of Christ caused you to change the way you live?
- When was the last time you sold something you didn't need to flee from greed and pursue generosity?
- When was the last time you changed the channel to avoid filling your mind with obscene and impure ideas and spent time in prayer and Bible reading?
- When was the last time you forgave someone who genuinely hurt you instead of rehearsing what they did?
- When was the last time you held your tongue to avoid gossip?
- When was the last time you deliberately thanked God for what you already had instead of feeding your discontentment wishing you had what somebody else has?

Truth is not an abstract set of doctrines; truth has somewhere to go. If truth really is leading you, it will move you to love others.

2. Let Love Move You (vv. 5-6)

⁵ And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another. ⁶ And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.

Nothing New: ⁵ And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another.

- This might *seem* new but it is not new at all (cf. 1 John 2:7, Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning).
 - God doesn't change. His word doesn't change. Its purpose and function become clearer in Christ. There is not an OT God and a NT God (wrath vs. love). The OT God has mercy and steadfast love, and Jesus has been known to flip a table in the temple. The same God has always existed and has been the same God revealed from cover to cover with the same plan to save those who are his.
 - John wants to disabuse us of the idea that what he is calling us to is a new invention of God. God's original design was love.
- From the beginning, God designed us for loving relationships with him and one another.
 - Loving others isn't extra credit Christianity; it's been on the syllabus from the beginning.
 - There is no true worship of God without genuine love for one another.

This is Love: ⁶ And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.

- He explains that true love is walking in the path God has given us. "[The] point is obvious in the modern situation where we are sometimes told: 'All you need is love.' Such advice is meaningless if the nature of love is not defined and unfolded. Love expresses itself in following the divine guidelines. At the same time, merely to keep the commands out of a

sense of duty or constraint or fear of punishment is not true love. Love means obedience from the heart and true concern for the good of others” (Marshall).

Truth is Love: We sometimes imagine that the more serious we get about truth, the less loving we will be. There seems to be ample evidence of this. Think about church’s with the name “grace” in the title that are not gracious (or friendship that are not friendly). But John says the opposite. Truth that doesn’t produce love hasn’t done its work in us.

- Truth is love and love must be true.
- You and I are loving no one if we are not walking in obedience to God’s commands and the truth of God’s word. *And God commands us in his word* to be loving, gracious, merciful, forgiving, and patient like Christ.

Why does all of this talk of the relationship between truth and love matter? If love means walking according to God’s commands, then love can’t simply mean saying ‘yes’ to everything. Love without discernment isn’t more loving; it’s more vulnerable to deception.

3. Let Discernment Guard You (vv. 7-13)

⁷ For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸ Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. ⁹ Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. ¹² Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete. ¹³ The children of your elect sister greet you.

Truth leads us. Truth moves us to love. And because we love, we have to guard against anything that would lead the people we love away from Jesus.

Warning: ⁷ For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. This is the heart of the practical warning for this church. All the previous verses help explain his exhortation here.²³ This explanatory section exists because they need truth-defined love *because* deceivers exist in the world.

- These deceivers aren’t just misguided in their own belief, but they lead others away from the truth. And because someone like this leads others away from the truth of Jesus, they are called an antichrist.²⁴
- Anyone who leads you away from the truth of Jesus is anti-Christ.
 - At the core of our faith, at the pinnacle of the gospel, is the truth of Jesus. As the earliest Christians summarized: “[We believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only

²³ ὅτι

²⁴ ὁ ἀντίχριστος

Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made human. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried. The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will never end.”²⁵

- “Anybody who fails to have a proper understanding of Jesus Christ cannot have a true relationship with God” (Marshall).
 - There is no path to God except through Jesus (Jn 14:6).

False Teaching: Those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.

- *Contra* Docetism, they didn’t deny the existence of Christ but the humanity of Christ.²⁶ E.g., Spirit good, humanity bad. Not a “no” belief, but a “wrong” belief.
- The felt it would sully God’s power to believe “that unreachable power came down and put on limbs that could be touched.” But he took on flesh “so that the needy could approach Him and, embracing His humanity, become aware of His divinity” (Ephrem the Syrain).²⁷ “For that which he has not assumed he has not healed.” (GNaz).²⁸
 - For humanity to be fully redeemed, the Son had to become fully human. The incarnation matters because our salvation depends on it.
- These false teachers didn’t confess the truth about Jesus.
 - To confess²⁹ doesn’t mean you just say you believe something; it means you agree and believe in your heart and soul what you are saying. It is aligning your beliefs with the truth of God’s Word.

Truth About Jesus: Some people deny the reality of Jesus’ divinity; others deny the reality of his humanity. The Christian belief is that Jesus is both fully God and fully human.

- It’s easy to deny his divinity. If he’s **divine**, then he has complete authority. But if he’s just a human it makes his commands less demanding. You can take his advice but don’t have to submit to his Lordship.
- What you believe about Jesus impacts everything; it’s non-negotiable.
 - That’s why we can’t join hands with Muslims, or JW’s, or Mormons, no matter how moral they are.
- In 2 John, they denied his humanity, trying to protect God from the corruption of the human experience. This has the effect of distancing God from us, making salvation impossible.
 - In an attempt to exalt God, they broke the connection God made between us for salvation.

²⁵ Nicene Creed

²⁶ And Marcianism, Gnosticism

²⁷ *Homily on our Lord*

²⁸ *Epistle 101, To Cledonius*. This is an argument against Apollinariaism.

²⁹ ὁμολογοῦντες

- While we see these lies in both extremes in our culture, be careful that we don't fall into their traps.
 - "Perhaps [we are] subtle enough to counterfeit rather than contradict [the truth]" (Stott).
 - We won't outright **deny his divinity**, but we'll but we'll domesticate him—treat Jesus like a life coach whose commands are suggestions rather than the Lord who has authority over every part of our lives.
 - We won't outright **deny his humanity**, but we'll distance him—act as though Jesus can't possibly understand our weakness, temptation, suffering, loneliness, or pain.

Watch Yo'self: ⁸ Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. ⁹ Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

- Watch out! This is a favorite phrase of Paul and Jesus.³⁰ Be on guard! Pay attention.
- If you think you're above being deceived, you're probably especially vulnerable to deception. "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12).
- Remain, don't drift, persevere. Make it to the finish line. "Perseverance is the proof of possession. To stay with Christ gives the clearest evidence that one belongs to Christ" (Akin).³¹
 - Abide in teaching of Christ.³² Devote your life to it. Saturate your heart with it. Be mastered by the word of God.³³

Hospitality: ¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

- Okay, John. You just commanded us to love one another. **So doesn't love mean welcoming people?**
 - Christian love isn't indiscriminate affirmation. Love wants what is good for someone, and nothing is more destructive than leading someone away from Jesus.
 - Sometimes love has to say no precisely because it loves what is good and true.
 - Love doesn't indiscriminately welcome everything. If something destroys the truth, welcoming it isn't loving. **Love needs discernment.**
- Refuse false **teachers** (not believers of false doctrine but teachers of false doctrine).³⁴
 - This is a deliberate deceiver, not an ignorant unbeliever.
- In a world with no **Holiday Inns**, the way these teachers traveled was to stay in someone's house.

³⁰ ΒΛΕΠΕΤΕ E.g., Matt 24:4; Mark 4:24; 8:15; 12:38; 13:5, 9, 23, 33; Luke 8:18; 21:8; 1 Cor 1:26; 8:9; 10:18; Gal 5:15; Phil 3:2; Col 2:8; Heb 3:12; 12:25

³¹ "But even Christian love can be counterfeited by people who present the appearance without the reality" (Marshall).

³² μένων ἐν τῇ διδασκίᾳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ

³³ Cf. *didaktikon*

³⁴ Jesus warns of false teachers (e.g., Mk 13:22-23, Jn 4:1).

- John is saying, if they are using your house as a base of operations to spread false teachings, then you are complicit in the spreading of eternally destructive lies. You are *participating* in their wickedness.³⁵
 - I'm *not* saying to leave the Mormon missionary on the doorstep.
- To “give a greeting” is more than a simple “hello” but a type of blessing and acknowledgment.³⁶ Don't cosign their heresy!³⁷
 - Don't use your resources, relationships, influence, platform, or approval to help someone lead people away from Jesus.

Outro: ¹² Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face,³⁸ so that our joy may be complete. ¹³ The children of your elect sister greet you.

- All of this comes from John's personal love and pastoral heart.
- This is a loving warning.

Conclusion

Application: So, as your pastor, how do I think this *loving warning applies* to you?

- What do you need to say no to? What lie have you been welcoming into your life that needs to be shown the door? This is a question only you can answer.
 - Maybe it's the lie that you need more money to be happy, so you've let greed, jealousy, and discontentment take up residence in your heart.
 - Or maybe it's the lie that you can do what you want as long as you claim Jesus, that your body belongs to you, rather than God.
 - Maybe you've let the lie of human approval carve out a space in your life, so you've compromised on telling the truth for fear that others will not like you.
 - It's time to evict the false beliefs from your heart that are leading you away from Jesus.
 - Don't be hospitable to sin! Don't be patient with the devil! Don't harbor false teaching.
 - Say no to lies, so you can embrace Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

³⁵ κοινωνεῖ

³⁶ χαίρειν (comes from “rejoice” it's a “be-glad” word)

³⁷ 1 Tim 5:22

³⁸ Lit. “mouth to mouth” (στόμα πρὸς στόμα)