

THE EPISTLES OF 1, 2, & 3 JOHN
RWANDAN PASTOR'S CONFERENCE
SESSION VI
2 JOHN

We come now to the second epistle of the Apostle John. Our study of this very short letter is going to be divided into five sections. First, we are going to look briefly at the background and key themes of the letter. Secondly, we are going to examine the salutation or opening section of the letter in v.1-3, in these verses John makes some very significant statements in just a few words. Third, we are going to dig into v.4-6 and John's message of walking in truth and love. The fourth section is v.7-11 where John continues his theme from 1 John in telling the believers to be constantly on guard to protect the truth of the gospel and nature of Christ. Finally, we will briefly examine the closing remarks of the Apostle in v.12-13.

BACKGROUND AND KEY THEMES:

The book of 2 John is actually the second shortest book in the New Testament. The only book shorter is the book of 3 John which we will be looking at shortly. In fact, 2 John only has 245 words in the original Greek language it was composed in.¹ I think we will all see, as we read the text, that John had the distinct intention of motivating the believers toward specific action. That action is a continuation of the themes we saw in 1 John: 1) For the believers to continue to walk in truth (right belief); 2) to continue to follow God's commands (obedient behavior); 3) and finally to live lives that are marked by a deep love for God and one another. All the while, John's ever-present warning to be on guard against the false teachers remains loudly embedded within the message of the second letter, as it was in the first.

Daniel Akin, one of the scholars I have used in preparing this material makes note of a few form issues in the letter as well as some key words and themes that we should be attentive to as we begin to read the letter. Let's begin with the form issues he addresses: Second John follows the typical pattern of a Greek letter of the 1st century A.D. It contains the typical opening section that identifies the sender, the recipients, and then contains a general greeting to all. The letter also contains a conclusion or closing remarks that is typical of letters of the period.²

As we read this very short letter, I would urge you to consider the fact that John employs several words very repetitively through the text. When a biblical writer uses a term over and over in a short space, he is trying to emphasize something. In the case of 2 John, we will see that the

Apostle uses the word “*truth*” (5 times); “*love*” (4 times); “*commandment*” (4 times); “*walk*” (3 times); “*teaching*” (3 times); and “*children*” (3 times). Consider also that this epistle only has 245 Greek words. These repetitious words account for 22 of those 245 terms. The magnitude of the message John is sending can be seen in that. Effectively almost 10% of the words of the letter are repetitious words designed to emphasize a specific message.

Lastly, as we have already mentioned, the second letter of John continues the basic trajectory of the first. We will see that he is continuing to urge the believers to: 1) walk the daily course of their lives in the truth of Jesus Christ. 2) As children of God, they are to obey the commands of God. 3) They are to live lives that exemplify a love toward one another, just as Christ first loved us. 4) As believers, they (we) are to guard the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ so that we will never be deceived by the false teachers who would lead us astray.³

THE SALUTATION – v.1-3

v.1-3:

As we approach these first two verses I want to begin by noting that there are two important items we have to interpret. Additionally, we can see the continuation of two of the themes we saw in 1 John. **What are the two important interpretive challenges you can see in v.1?**

The first is the writer’s reference to himself, and the second is his designation of the recipients of the letter. Regarding the first, the reference to himself, the writer uses the term *elder*. Over the course of Church history, much has been made of this term here in v.1. Most of the controversy originates from the writings of a medieval scholar named Eusebius. He tried to interpret this term as meaning someone other than an Apostle of Christ, therefore the Apostle John could not be the writer. However, this simply does not stand up to the scrutiny of Scripture or the general writings of the Church in the first decades of its existence. The term was used to reference men who served a local congregation in a pastoral leadership type of capacity. Often these were either leading pastors, but also they were often multiple elders within a congregation. The first actual use of the term in the New Testament is in Acts 11:30 where we see that the use here is plural, indicating that within the Jerusalem church there were multiple elders. Additionally, since they are the ones receiving the gifts from other churches, it is clear that they hold leadership roles.

Another point of interest that we need to make here is that Scripture also shows that Apostles used this term in reference to themselves, most particularly when they assumed pastoral responsibilities. Notice that in Acts 21:18, the Apostle James (leader of the Jerusalem church) is grouped into the classification of elders with his other local leaders. Yet in Gal. 1:19, this same James is referred to as an Apostle. Likewise we see the same precedent established with Peter. In 1 Pet. 1:1, Peter refers to himself as an Apostle. However in 5:1 he refers to himself as a “*fellow elder*”.⁴ Peter uses each of these in reflection to his roles as an apostle and as a fellow pastor, respectively.

Another point that must be considered is that the most straight-forward, common understanding of the term elder is that of an “*old or aged man*”. When this is expressed in the context of the church, it represents one who has both age and wisdom in possession of authority and leadership because of his character and virtue.⁵ Given that there is clear evidence in Scripture that demonstrates the Apostles were often referred to as elders when in their pastoral capacities, along with the most straight-forward use of the term and the similarity of the letter to 1 John, there is no reason to suggest anyone other than *the Apostle John* as the writer of this letter.

Let’s turn to the second interpretive challenge of the opening: “*the elect lady and her children*”. **What are your thoughts here? Who do you think John is referring to??**

There are three primary interpretations: **First**, the reference is to a local church and its congregation. **Second**, the reference is to the universal church. **Third**, the reference is to an individual lady and her children. By far the majority of scholarship favor the first interpretation, that the elect lady is a reference to a local church, and her children is a reference to its members. The term “lady” in the original Greek language is the feminine version of the term for lord. Many scholars have called attention to this as a hint to the Church as the bride of Christ, a highly privileged position because of God’s grace.

Now let’s turn to the tone that John sets in the very outset of the letter. He calls upon a continuing theme from 1 John. **Do you see it?? What is it??**

As John references this congregation and its members, he immediately refers to the great *love* he has for them. Further, this is a love that finds its basis in *truth*. This truth is the true faith

in the Lord Jesus Christ. John is not only calling upon the common bond held because of their common true belief. He is making an intimate connection with a congregation that he most certainly loved! Both were of paramount importance, especially in this congregation where false teachers threatened both truth and love.

Turning to v.3 we see a pattern typical of most letters of the period. Notice John offers a triple blessing of *grace, mercy, and peace*. These represent God's unmerited kindness; His compassion and readiness to forgive sin; and the concept of wholeness and well-being in life, respectively.⁶ **Is John wishing this blessing be placed upon the congregation??**

No, notice that he says these blessing “*will be with us*”. He is not wishing or hoping they receive this triple blessing. John knows this will be the case. Then in closing John once again stresses the themes of truth and love. For a church to be healthy, it must cling tightly to truth, and they must love one another in a way that knows no bounds!!

WALKING IN TRUTH AND LOVE – v.4-6

Before we dive into the body of John's letter, I would like to give you an overview of a couple of general points which Daniel Akin brings out. The first general point is to notice that the body of the letter, v.4-11 contain three commands:⁷

1. The first command is to “*love one another*”. This is seen very clearly in v.5-6.
2. The second command is to “*watch out*”. This is seen in v.8 and corresponds to John's continued warning regarding the false teachers.
3. The third command is “*do not receive him*”. This command is seen in v.10 and is related to the second command. John is bluntly telling the believers to reject these false teachers and do not receive them into your congregation.

The second general point I would like to bring out is regarding the five significant contrasts that John places in the text:⁸

1. First, Notice the contrast of those who walk in the truth, (v.4a) vs. those who reject the truth, (v.7&9).
2. Secondly, the command received in the beginning, (v.5c & 6b) vs. the teaching which has gone beyond Christ, (v.9).
3. Third, work which is to be rewarded, (v.8) vs. wicked works, (v.11).

4. Fourth, those who continue in Christ, vs. those who do not, (v.9).
5. Finally, those who refuse to welcome false teachers vs. those who at least hypothetically welcome them, (v.10-11).

v.4-6:

We have to pick up the pace a bit if we are to finish this letter. As we look to this section of the text, I would call your attention to v.4 and ask: **Tell me what you see in this verse??**

We talked in the opening section about how John was referring to himself as an *elder*, and how this word was commonly associated with one who held the role of pastoral leadership within a church body. In v. 4 we see this concept being brought to bear. John is warmly embracing the congregation, just as a loving pastor should embrace a faithful and obedient body. Additionally, one element of Greek is also important here. The word *find* is here used in the *perfect tense*. Just as we saw so many times in 1 John, the Apostle has already known them to have *walked in the truth* in the past, and this state continues into the very present. This demonstrates that their obedience is continuous.

Flowing from this commendation are the words of v.5. **Tell me a little about what you see in John's words here??**

The first thing I would point you to is how John links v.5 to v.4. *“And now dear lady,,,”* In essence John is saying, *“Now, because of your obedience of faith in truth,,,”* Because they are obedient, faithful followers of Christ, John presents the first of the three commands mentioned above. **Which command is it??**

It is found at the very end of v.5. John is calling these believers to *“love one another”*. Between the opening and the instruction we see John make clear that this is nothing new. The false teachers could not say this, for they do have a “new command”, and their command is false. God's message does not change!!

Verse 6 signals the end of this section. In v.5 he has instructed the faithful congregation to *“love one another”*. Now here is v.6 he is explaining just what that love looks like: Just like his message in 1 John, the one who loves God, walks in obedience to his command.

Additionally, from 1 John and here in v.6, his command is to walk in love. (see also 1 John 2:7-11.) This love is a love that true believers have toward both God and each other.

GUARDING THE TRUTH OF CHRIST – v.7-11

Now we come to the heart of the letter. John is about to make a very abrupt shift in his tone and language as he begins to address the heretics. As we will see, the heresy in question was one of great significance. Because of this, John will employ some very strong language as he issues the final two commands of the letter.

v.7:

The opening word “*For*” links v.7 to the previous passage; John has commanded the believers to walk in obedience which manifests in love for one another because he knows that great dangers lurks among them. **What is this great danger??**

The heart of John’s message deals with him warning the faithful community about the great heresy of: “*those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.*” **What does this mean?? What is John saying here about these false teachers??**

They deny that Jesus Christ ever came in the flesh. This is the exact same group of people that John was referring to in 1 John 2:18-27; and 4:1-3. **What is the significance of this denial??**

The error of these teachers strikes at the very heart of the doctrine of Christ, specifically the incarnation!!⁹ For one to deny the incarnation of Christ is to deny the divine propitiation of the cross. There is simply no room in Christian faith for a belief that denies the very work of Christ. These false teachers were very likely representing a very early form of Gnosticism. Specifically, they represented a form of *Docetism*. This fancy word comes from the Greek word δοκεω (*dokeo*). This term means “to seem” or “to appear as”. Docetism denies that Jesus was truly human. Instead they contend that he merely “seemed to be” or “appeared to be” a human.

John concludes v.7 by calling these heretics what they truly were: *Deceivers* who were set upon a task of leading their neighbors into the depths of their heresies. Secondly he calls the *antichrists* because that is exactly what they were: Men who were “*against*” (anti) Christ!

v.8-9:

The second command of the epistle is seen here: **What is it??**

I mentioned in the opening of this section that John's tone, and his grammar were going to shift dramatically. The loving pastor of v.4-6 has now taken on the role of the stern shepherd and protector of his flock. This was evident in v.7. Now here in v.8 we see the first of two strong command words. His words in Greek are literally translated: **"You WATCH yourselves!!,,"**
What is John telling them to watch out for?? What is the danger??

John is calling upon the congregation to be constantly on guard against the heresy of the false teachers. He knew the danger of their doctrine to the church. John's actual word here is the term βλέπετε (*blepete*). This is the only recorded use of this term by John. However, Jesus used this term several times to warn his disciples about those who would deceive them, (Mark 8:15; 12:38; 13:23; Heb. 3:12). Without getting into a detailed lesson on Greek grammar, let me also say that John uses this term in the *present tense*. In Greek grammar, the present tense carries the meaning of something not only present "now", but **"continuous"** in nature. Thus John is not just saying: **"Watch out now"**. His words actually mean: **"Be on constant guard"**.

Now we get into the more tricky part of the passage. Look at the second phrase of v.8.
What is John warning the believers that is at stake here??

Much has been written on this portion of the passage. We must interpret it in the context of the current passage. That context is: John is speaking to loyal, faithful believers in Jesus Christ and to them obtaining their **"full reward"** for lives of faithful service. Even still, some would say that John is warning that **their salvation can be lost**. Others argue that John is simply saying that a true believer who falls into the trap of these false teachings will **not be fully rewarded**. Daniel Akin likens this passage to the warning passages of Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12 (emphasis 6:4-6); 10:19-39 (emphasis 26-31); 12:14-29.¹⁰ I agree with Akin that we must be careful not to be too dogmatic on verses like this. I would however point out that in this verse John uses the term μισθὸν (*misthon*). This term means **"reward; wage; what is paid back"**. However, in John's other writings, when he speaks of **salvation**, he uses forms of the noun σωτηρία (*soteria*): (John 4:22) or the verb form σώζω (*sozo*): (John 12:47; 3:17; 5:34; 10:9). Yet here he employs a completely different term. Despite this difference, I think Akin's advice is

appropriate here: “What does seem clear is that for John, perseverance is proof of possession [of salvation]¹¹. That is to say, we do not “*earn*” salvation via our perseverance. However, our perseverance is “*evidence of*” the salvation we have been granted.

Moving on to v.9 we see that John presents the climax of the warning. **What does John mean when he refers to “Everyone who goes on ahead,,,”??**

The person who “*goes on ahead*” is that person who alters the biblical testimony regarding Jesus. There is simply no room for this in the church. God’s word is both inerrant and divinely inspired. Anyone who has the arrogance to think they need to alter it “to make it a little better” steps outside of the boundaries of our faith. I am reminded of Jesus’ words in Revelation 22:18-19.

v.10-11:

Here we see the third and final command of the letter. John is commanding the believers not to receive or welcome these false teachers into their house. These are some pretty tough words. **What are your thoughts here?? Do you think John is saying that we are not to associate or provide Christian hospitality to any non-believer we come in contact with??**

Most certainly this command is open to significant abuse. Some scholars have gone so far as to say that John was addressing an emergency situation that was present only at that point and thus we need to reject this command in our day. However, I concur with Akin that this is an unnecessary step. Think about this:

1. John is not telling them they cannot speak with these false teachers.
2. John is not saying they cannot extend basic human courtesy / hospitality to them in order to confront them with the true gospel.
3. He is saying that believers are not to support the ministry of false teachers in any way.

Recall that in the opening of the letter, John has referred to this congregation in a familial sense. A family resides in a “house”. Here in v.10 John is commanding the believers not to bring this false teaching into “*their house*”, that is “*their church, or midst of their congregation*”. False doctrine and false teachers have no place in our churches and here John is commanding us to keep them out and keep our churches pure. However, the moment that we fail to meet the lost with the true gospel of Jesus Christ, is the moment we abandon the great commission of Christ in

Matthew 28:18-20!! Thus great care must be taken with this verse. It is a command to keep our faith and our sanctuaries clean and free from any hint of false doctrine. But it is not a license to pick and choose whom we will confront with the gospel of Christ.

Verse 11 simply puts the icing on the cake. Here John provides the consequences of not following the command of v.10. For the church that chooses to cozy up with false teachers, to allow false doctrines to be taught within the confines of their congregations there are grave consequences. They have made themselves a part of the evil. No longer are they distinct, they are part of it!! In my country we have a saying that is analogous to this: ***“If you lie down with dogs, you will get fleas.”*** As my children were growing up, especially in their teenage years, I used to tell them: ***“You are who you hang out with.”*** John is conveying a similar message here.

We are going to close here in our study of 2 John. The final two verses are the Apostle’s closing remarks which are very straight-forward. We will move on next to 3 John.

ENDNOTES

¹Daniel L. Akin. *The New American Commentary: vol. 38 1,2,3 John*. Edited by Richard R. Melick Jr., Paige Patterson, Curtis Vaughan. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2001. 217.

² Ibid. 218.

³ Ibid.

⁴Robert W. Yarbrough. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1-3 John*. Edited by Robert Yarbrough and Robert Stein. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2008. 329-30.

⁵ Akin. 219.

⁶ Ibid. 222.

⁷ Ibid. 223.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 228.

¹⁰ Ibid. 231.

¹¹ Ibid.