

DATE: May 24, 2009
SERIES: New Testament Postcards
SERMON: *Nothing But the Truth?*
SCRIPTURE: 2 John
SPEAKER: Pastor Dick High

Introduction:

On each of the last four Lord's Day, Pastor Mike has led us through a careful and deliberate examination of the book of Jude. It is one of the Biblical books sometimes referred to as a New Testament Postcard. Although brief, only 25 verses, its truth is powerful and pertinent. (Should we expect anything less from the pages of Scripture?)

Today we turn our focus to another of the New Testament Postcards, 2 John. It is found just a page or two before Jude. It is the shortest of all Bible books; it could have been contained on a single papyrus sheet. Although not as "aggressive" in its presentation as Jude, it is a skillfully crafted treatise that calls the believer to be firmly grounded in truth and alert to those who would deceive.

Setting and Background

The Apostle John is the author. The approximate date of composition is 90-95 AD. According to verse 1 it is addressed to "the chosen lady." Two prominent suggestions of identity are given. Either these words refer to a specific individual, a woman, who was known by the apostle, or they refer to a larger community, perhaps a specific church. I would lean toward the second understanding; regardless the issues addressed are of importance for the church, whether individually or corporately.

I believe the ultimate purpose for which 2 John was written is the warning that begins in verse 7. What I find interesting is the manner in which this warning is presented, or "packaged." Rather than being the first issue addressed, this warning is nestled within the text that has an overall atmosphere of warmth and encouragement.

As I read through the verses, look for these things, as well as repeated words and subjects that identify the primary points of emphasis.

¹*The elder,*

To the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth - ²because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever:

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

⁴*It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. ⁵And 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. ⁶And 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.*

⁷*Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. ⁹Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. ¹¹Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.*

¹²*I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.*

¹³*The children of your chosen sister send their greetings.*

Points of Emphasis

There are five words or points of emphasis from these verses that I will use to direct our focus: “truth,” “love,” “commands,” “deceivers,” and “teaching.” Although the flow of 2 John presents these subjects in an overall progression, there is a significant intermingling and even overlap between them.

Truth and Love Verses 1-4

I’ve chosen to combine the first two subjects, truth and love, although the initial emphasis is on truth.

What is truth? That is a question that Pontius Pilate asked Jesus during his interaction with Christ prior to the crucifixion. Currently the staff is reading together The Courage to Be Protestant, by David Wells. On page 72 he answers that question in this way. *If there is such a thing as truth, how are we going to define it? The classic definition that emerged in the Middle Ages is this: truth is the correspondence between an object and our knowledge of it. What is said about something must reflect exactly what that something is if that statement is to be true.*

In other words, truth is “objective statements that accurately represent (absolute) reality.” It is something that can be verified.

Because we are considering this term in a Biblical context we need to expand our understanding. On page 77 David Wells writes: *Christianity is supernatural religion. It is the exact opposite of all paganisms, ancient or (post)modern. It is about the one God who has made himself known, who has provided an objective truth through the inspired biblical writers, and who, in his grace, has provided the subjective conditions within the hearts of sinners whereby that truth can be received, understood, and obeyed.*

In His high priestly prayer in John 17:17 Jesus asks this of his Father: *Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.* Christ did not say that God’s word contains truth; He states that it IS truth! Psalm 119:160 states, *All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.* The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, the belief in God’s intricate and intimate involvement in the creation of the Biblical text, is of critical importance. One final quote from David Wells. *Scripture is the result of the supernatural work of God in the human writers, and what we now have is “the truth.” It is not partial truth, or incomplete truth. It is the full, accurate, and complete revelation of all that God wants the church to have. This written truth is fully sufficient for the church’s life in this fallen world.*

We don’t have time to develop this discussion further this morning. It would be of profit for anyone to find a concordance and look through the numerous passages in Scripture that speak about just this one subject; the truth. One of the fascinating and profound facts that you’ll encounter will be in those passages in which it is stated that Christ Himself is the truth! He, being fully God, is the embodiment of truth itself. Everything He states is true. As John 1:14 affirms, *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Specifically looking now at 2 John, note what is said here about the truth. First, in verse 1, we find the phrase *whom I love in the truth.* Truth is the context in which believers are to love one another. Truth gives definition to what love is (and is not) and how it acts. Also, in verse 1, truth is something that can be and is

known; not just individually or independently, but in a corporate context; *and not I only, but also all who know the truth*. Further, in verse 2, truth is something that is alive, it *lives in us*. It is more than mere fact. It possesses spiritual vitality. In the words of Hebrews 4:12: *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*.

Do you get the impression that John is emphasizing a point? I think this artwork by Johann Christoph Weigel captures well this prominent focus of 2 John. John is writing this epistle to give focus to the truth – “*veritas*.” People of various ages are basking in the light of the truth. They are reaching out to receive the truth.

But truth is not the sole focus of this epistle. Woven throughout the first 6 verses of 2 John, there is a balancing emphasis on love. In verse 3 we are told that major themes of Scripture, prominent characteristics of God – grace, mercy, and peace – are to be understood in the context of and experienced in and through both truth and love!

Scripture warns us (I Corinthians 8:1-3) that knowledge – of the truth – can engender pride. The appropriate preventative is to wed truth with love. Standing in isolation truth can be presented in an insensitive, impatient, condemning or condescending manner. But without truth, love will drift toward sentimentalism, lead to the inappropriate lowering of standards or drift on the seas of our own definition.

David Legge, in a sermon on 2 John phrases it this way: *...here's John's point in the New Testament context: If we are inhabited, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, if God lives in us by the Spirit, we are enabled to walk in the same love, to walk as He walked. So, to walk in truth means that we walk in love.*

Commands Verses 4-6

The next point of emphasis, to which I draw our attention, is the word “command.” Please know that there is no distinct line dividing these various subjects. Any command that comes from God, the Father, would be truth: truth that we are to “walk in,” and truth that we are to obey. And according to verse 6, *this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands*.

The word “command” refers to an order given, a commission established, or a direction set. In Scriptural usage, the order, commission, or direction is that which God gives. The commands of Scripture thus express the will of God.

The Old Testament word for “command” incorporates the expectation of obedience. In a Biblical context since these commands are God’s, because they are true and because they are an unchangeable expression of His will, it is appropriate to expect obedience.

The entirety of Christ’s life demonstrates a continual submission to the Father’s commands. He clearly stated this direction for His life in John 14:31: *...but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.*” (Notice again the intertwining of love, truth, and commands.)

One point that John emphasizes as he focuses on this subject of commands is addressed in verse 5. He determines it necessary to state that the command about which he speaks is not new. What could be his concern?

The command to love one another has deep Old Testament roots. Yet, the words of Christ recorded in John 13:34 speak of a new command. *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you*

must love one another. The appropriate understanding of these words is that it is Christ's selfless example of sacrificial love that is new. This gives a depth of meaning and application previously unavailable.

It is quite possible, that the deceivers that John will write about beginning in verse 7 were using a similar logic in their teaching. Perhaps they prefaced their teaching in this way: "If established teachings of Scripture can have new light shed upon them, could it not be possible that what you have been taught about Christ can have some new light shed upon that too? We are here to do that! What we want to share is a development of, an improvement of the gospel." Perhaps they also suggested that their motive in bringing this teaching was love and concern for the believers.

Knowing what he is going to write in verse 7 and following, in verses 5 & 6 John states that the truth he is presenting is not something new, novel, or an addition to Scripture. Yes, we **are** to love one another. That has always been God's command. But, Biblically understood, love corresponds to, can even be defined as walking in obedience to God's commands. Love is not to be separated or viewed in isolation from obedience to God's commands; it is not to be separated from "walking in the truth." Anything that is presented as "new" must be evaluated regarding its consistency with establish truth.

Deceivers (Deception) Verses 7-9

It is these purveyors of "another gospel" that John calls *deceivers* in verse 7. These are individuals who have strayed from the truth and are mistaken in their beliefs. They are traveling from city to city, looking for opportunities to share their heresies. John writes to warn believers to watch out for this false teaching, to not be drawn into its error, and to avoid offering hospitality to anyone who is traveling around to share these false beliefs. If no one in the church would welcome them or offer them a place to stay and food to eat, their efforts would be greatly hindered.

The one aspect of this false teaching that John identifies is that these deceivers *do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh*. The likely heresy that is being described here is Docetism. That is the belief that Jesus' physical body was an illusion, as was his crucifixion; that is, Jesus only seemed to have a physical body and to physically die, but in reality he was incorporeal, a pure spirit, and hence could not physically die.

This belief is most commonly attributed to the Gnostics, many of whom believed that matter was evil, and as a result God would not take on a material body. This statement is rooted in the idea that a divine spark was imprisoned within the material body, and that the material body is in itself an obstacle, deliberately created by an evil, lesser god to prevent man from seeing his divine origin.

This is serious error! It discounts the incarnation, it makes the sinless life of Christ during the incarnation irrelevant, it undermines the significance of the crucifixion, and it has no need for the resurrection. This error would thus minimize the reality of sin, distort the understanding of God's wrath, and create confusion regarding judgment. Notice how strongly John states his opposition to this error. In the latter portion of verse 7 he states that any person who holds that position is "the deceiver and the antichrist." He does not mean that they are the actual antichrist of Revelation, but that they embody his beliefs and work! This is a strong statement, akin to what the Apostle Paul states in Galatians 1:8 – *But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!*

John writes to urge these believers to *watch out*. To follow error is to abandon continuance in the teaching of Christ ("continuance" is the same word Christ uses in John 15 when He urges the believer to "remain" in Him). To follow error may have the perception of "getting ahead" but in reality it is a wandering away from *the teaching of Christ*.

Teaching Verses 9-11

That phrase (*the teaching of Christ*) introduces the last of the five points of emphasis in this brief epistle. John writes to urge us of the importance of continuance in the *teaching* of Christ. Of course, that would be teaching based on truth. That would be teaching that accurately presents Christ's identity. It would be Biblical truth about Him and the teaching He Himself presented. Continuance in that teaching is the basis on which an ongoing relationship with the Father and the Son develops and deepens. Compare what is said in the latter half of verse 9 with what Christ states in John 14:21 & 23. *Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by My Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we welcome to him and make our home with him.*

What a wonderful promise! But when we return to 2 John, we note that this promise, found in verse 9, is followed by an application of warning. *If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching* (true, Biblically grounded teaching about Christ and the necessity of continuance in that), *do not take him into your house or welcome him* (verse 10). *Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work* (verse 11).

These are strong words. We are warned against encouraging or supporting apostasy in any way.

John then concludes by acknowledging there is much more that he desires to communicate but his preference is to do so face to face. Although he has spoken with strong words, he anticipates that meeting together will be a time of joy.

Walking Away With More than Just the Truth

As we move toward the conclusion of today's message my desire is that we walk away from this time spent sifting through 2 John with a full understanding of what is written.

I don't know how much people pay attention to sermon titles. They are not a critical part of a sermon, yet it can be interesting to know why they are chosen.

What I have done is take a phrase normally heard in a court of law and changed what is a statement into a question. The point I desire to emphasize is the importance of not just knowing the truth; we need to live the truth. It needs to permeate our life, effecting both actions and attitudes. As my first point of application suggests, we are to wholeheartedly embrace the truth.

- **Wholeheartedly Embrace the Truth**

We are to "love" in and through the truth. We are to know the truth. The truth is to be "alive" within the believer. We are to "walk" in the truth. We are to walk in obedience to this truth, as found in God's commands. We are to continue in the teaching of this truth. (I think John is trying to make a point!)

Truth is to serve as a filter, standard, "sword," and guide. Biblical truth is to be the basis by which we evaluate decisions, establish priorities, handle our finances, critique our culture, and much, much more.

I pray that one of the effects of our time in 2 John this morning will be a fresh encouragement to be a person of the truth. But not just to know it; reaffirming the importance of embracing it, absorbing it, and living it!

- **Beware of the Trap of "New," "Better," or "Different"**

In our quest for knowing the truth and living in the truth, we do need to be cautious of a temptation that can arise. It is no secret that we live in a culture that continually bombards us with messages luring us toward that which is presented as new or better. While there may not be anything inherently wrong with that concept, we do need to filter all of the ‘invitations’ through the truth of Scripture, using a foundation of Biblical principles to guide our decisions.

But even more significantly, we need to be aware that we have an enemy, Satan, who prowls around, according to I Peter, seeking someone to devour. His own history reveals, as recorded in Isaiah 14, that his discontent with his created position drove him to pursue that which he perceived to be better; which would necessitate usurping God’s place. That lust still burned within him when he skillfully approached Adam and Eve with the suggestion that God’s goodness and word (the truth) was to be doubted and that something new and better would come by disregard of God’s commands.

In 2 John the concern is that deceivers, false teachers, often present their message with the emphasis that what they share is new, and better “truth,” that one is missing out if they don’t incorporate this new teaching into their life. For the believer, who is committed to the truth, the enticement of that temptation can be significant. We are encouraged to grow in our knowledge of Christ. But, we must test and weigh all teaching on the basis of established truth, truth that is consistent with Scripture, truth that upholds the deity of Christ, the fact of the incarnation, the truth of His sinless life, the reality of His crucifixion as a death of substitutionary sacrifice, and the certainty of His resurrection.

- **Determine Appropriate Occasions to be a “Mean” Christian**

The instruction John gives in verse 10 & 11 is strong, straightforward, and raises an interesting question. When is it appropriate to be “mean” as a believer? Was it possible that among those, to whom John writes this epistle, there is a number of individuals whose strength or giftedness was hospitality? If so, do they recognize that there are dangers in using that gift without discernment? When is it appropriate to engage someone who has embraced error in dialogue or debate? And when is it appropriate to avoid such individuals? Are there times when just being kind and hospitable is the wrong thing to do?

I believe the answer is “Yes!” There are such times. They may be infrequent. Pastor Mike suggested one such situation last week when he encouraged us to not debate those of a cult who knock on our door. But when they occur, 2 John instructs us to not support or encourage in any way those who are themselves deceived and who seek to deceive.

Before we conclude, I want to address a final question. Why all this fuss about the truth?

I want to answer that question with the testimony of a young Russian woman, Zhenya, that was made available by Lois McNeill.

“My name is Zhenya and I come from Russia. I would like to share my testimony of how God changed my life. I was born in prison. My mother was in prison for falsifying documents. I was three months premature and I weighed only one kilogram. To get rid of me, my mother put me on the window sill. She wanted me to die because it was forbidden to have a baby in prison. She waited for me to die, but I wouldn’t. I cried and cried and finally a nurse heard me and took me in her hands and warmed me and helped. I was put into a children’s home, and many doctors said I would not survive. I had problems with my health, but still, they tried to save me.

I stayed in one children’s home until I was three, then I was sent to another one. I remember when my

mother came to take me. I was around four or five and I was afraid of her and so I hid under the bed. The administrators said “No, we will not give you Zhenya”. She cried and shouted, but they would not give me to her.

When I was ten years old, I was sent to a third children’s home. There, I started to question “Why am I here?” “What is the meaning of life?” Life in this home was difficult as we children were given little attention and we fought among ourselves every day. Still, my curiosity grew every year. My teachers couldn’t answer my questions. I worried about my future and I was afraid.

When I was 15 years old, a new girl came to live in the home. Julia was different and I found her very interesting. Every morning while the others were still sleeping, she sat on her bed and read out of a book. I became so curious about this that one morning I went up to her and asked, “What are you reading?” She simply held up her Bible and said “This book is the meaning of life”, then she got up and walked away. I was so frustrated, because that was all that she said. Later we began to talk and she told me about Jesus—that He died for my sin as my Savior and that He could change my life. It so touched my heart. I believed these words easily, maybe because it was what I was seeking. I repented and immediately something in me changed. I began to see the orphanage and the children and administrators with other eyes. I started helping the children, playing with them and breaking up their fights.

Julia and I began reading the Bible. We began to sing together. The other children called us bad words and soon the whole orphanage knew that we were Christians, “Baptists”—we were enemies. When the headmistress found out, she became very frustrated with us. Julia was a good example to me. When she was mocked by the other children, she didn’t say a word. She was so strong. It was an example that still impresses me. Julia and I spent two years together at this children’s home before we graduated out.

Upon graduating out of the orphanage system, I was afraid to start a new life. I knew that Julia would go to another city, but I didn’t know what I would do. I moved to the same city where Julia was living where I entered the university and lived in the dormitory. It was the first time I had met such people and seen this kind of living. I forgot about God and began smoking, drinking and going to discos—believing that it was normal as all those around me were doing it. Suddenly, something touched my heart and I found myself miserable. I was so alone. At the children’s home there were educators—people who could give advice; but here I was alone. There was no one with whom I could talk or share. Yes, there were other people, but no one who really understood. I used to come back to the dormitory sit on my bed and cry because I didn’t have anyone.

After two years, I was having problems with my studies and problems passing my exams and so I left the university. I had no place to live and since I was no longer studying, I had no income. I began to stay in friends’ homes and sometimes living on the street. I found myself alone and hopeless. I felt that I was nothing and I had many thoughts of taking my life. My soul was cold and dark. I lived the whole summer like this. Then one night I had a dream. It was a very beautiful dream. I saw Julia again. The dream was bright and full of colors. There was Julia, smiling. She was so beautiful and happy.

The next morning I dressed, went out and started walking. I didn’t know where I was going, I just walked. I didn’t know where Julia lived, but I thought, I must find her—only she could help me. After walking for about three hours, I saw a girl in front of me. I couldn’t see her face, but from the back, it looked it could be Julia. I approached her and said “Hello Julia.” She turned to me and said “Hi Zhenya. I knew that today or tomorrow, you would come. “ I was shocked. She continued “During the last two years I was praying that you would return to God.” We hugged and prayed together and I told her the whole story of what I had been doing since leaving the orphanage. When I left Julia, it was as though I were walking on air. I had hope that a new life would start, once again.

After meeting with Julia, I had a very difficult struggle because Satan said, “Don’t choose this way. Don’t you remember?? We had fun. You had friends. You don’t want to change.” For two weeks this continued as I weighed my choices. It was a very difficult time. Then one morning at the end of August, I knew whom I would choose. I just fell to my knees and said, “I’m weak. I can’t struggle anymore. Jesus, take my life.” I always knew that God was with me, but sometimes I couldn’t feel him. It was as though he had forgotten about me. But at this time, I really felt Him standing near me, giving me his hand and saying “Here I am.” I told Him I was sorry for all I had done. I began reading the Bible again. I was hungry for His Word and I had hope. God miraculously opened the way for me to go to another university. I began to attend church and to meet new friends, who are my best friends now. He gave me what I was seeking -- the meaning of life, who I am, why I was born. Now I know. Because the meaning of life is Jesus Christ and His love.”

Why this fuss about the truth? Because, as Jesus said; ...*you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*. Error, regardless of how attractive, ultimately enslaves, and engenders spiritual darkness. We insist on the truth because God does so.