

Study 8: 2nd John Letter

Introduction

The second letter provides a summary of the first letter, and then succinctly draws the readers to address the problems with the false teachers. He does this by drawing together two specific contrasts between the false teachers and the christians.

Body of the Study

Loving God, and Faith in Christ

Greeting

Walking in Love

Warning Against False Teachers

Fellowship with False Teachers

Final Greetings

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read the letter again right through

Read the third letter in preparation for the next study

Do we only love those christians who agree with us, or do we also love others who may disagree with us? What does it mean to love others “because of the truth” (vs 2)

What are the two prongs of the letter, and how does John bring them together?

Notes for study 8: 2nd John Letter

The second letter provides a summary of the first letter, and then succinctly draws the readers to address the problems with the false teachers. He does this by drawing together two specific contrasts between the false teachers and the Christians.

Loving God, and Faith in Christ

The first two verses form a type of introduction, after which John gives the greeting that is common among many of the writings of the New Testament.

John addresses the letter “...*To the elect lady and her children...*” (2:1:1 NKJV). As discussed in the introduction, this is most likely a reference to a church (or group of churches) in the region. John is certainly familiar with them on a first-hand basis, and he only needs to introduce himself as “...*The old man...*” (2:1:1). His familiarity is confirmed by the statement “...*whom I love in truth...*” (2:1:1 NKJV).

The statements of *love* (*agape* love) and *truth* are both used and repeated in the introduction section of the letter, which tells us that these are important issues. The false teachers (Gnostics) had no real concern for the brethren, as their motivation was to deceive (1:2:26), and they did not belong to God (1:2:19). In contrast, John has a very deep relationship with the brethren, which is based on deep and intimate love (*agape* love) – the same kind of love that God showed in sacrificing His son for us. The relationship is also built on truth.

It is not only John who has the relationship with them, but also brethren everywhere “...*and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth...*” (2:1:1 NKJV). Again, this is in clear contrast to the false teachers who do not have the truth (and do not know Jesus – because He said “...*I am the way, the truth, and the life...*” Jn 14:6). Disciples everywhere are in a relationship with each other because they are in a relationship with God. We *know the truth* both in the sense that we know Jesus, and also because we know the “correctness” of the things that God has revealed to us.

But truth is not just “facts” that we know are “correct”. It is something that is part of us. We have it in our hearts, love truth and hate falsehood “...*because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever...*” (2:1:2 NKJV).

John goes on to explain why the community of love can be so inclusive. Love relates to the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever. Truth, for him, is more than what is objectively known. It is that which indwells believers, permeating their whole existence. Because it is the truth of God, it has no temporal limitation. Love and truth are not passing sentiments, nor are they dependent on depths of emotional feeling or the strength of one's personal commitment. Love and truth originate in God. Like him, they endure without changing, and their splendor never fades. (NIVBC)

Greeting

John's greeting is typical of introductions that are common among many of the writings of the New Testament “...*Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love...*” (2:1:3 NKJV). However, rather than a wish “may God's peace be upon you” John pronounces a promise “*Grace mercy and peace will be with you...*” and of course, the promise is conditional upon our remaining in Him “in truth and love...”. Truth and love remain the central theme in the message that John is giving to the brethren, which, of course, is in direct contrast to the false teachers!

John's personal relationship with the brethren is shown as he continues the greeting with a personal comment. “...*It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us...*” (2:1:4 NIV). Walking in the truth is not optional. It is where God is, and it is who God is. The reverse is true – that Satan is the father of lies, and if we

do not walk in the truth, then we walk with Satan. (he brings this out on vs 9). He sums it up here by saying that walking in the truth is something that *the Father has commanded us*.

John has come across some of the members from the church(es) that he is writing to, and has found them to be faithfully following the truth. He has received a report of the situation in the church(es) concerning how they have dealt with the false teachers, and has been pleased – had great joy – to have found them faithful.

Walking in Love

Whilst walking in the truth is important, love (*agape* love) has precedence, and is also a commandment of God. In fact, John *urges* the brethren to exercise love “...and now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another...” (2:1:5 NKJV). This is not something new – it is something that we should have always been doing. Jesus gave the disciples *a new commandment*, (Jn 13:34) and John takes them back to it.

Love for one another is what the Father required (1Jn 4:7), the Son manifested (1Jn 3:16), and the Spirit makes available through life in him (1Jn 4:13-15). (NIVBC)

Love is the true manifestation of our relationship with God. We can make false professions of our faith, and we can pretend to live our lives as christians. But love (*agape* love) is something that cannot be feigned “...*this is love, that we walk according to His commandments...*” (2:1:6 NKJV). Love requires us to do something. That’s the way it was with God too. His love required Him to send Jesus and for Jesus to be the sacrifice for us. Sometimes the kind of love that we think about might have the idea of God sitting back in heaven and just admiring us with a sentimental and emotional feeling, thinking about how He loves us. But that’s not it at all. God’s love required commitment – it required action, and it required sacrifice. When we exhibit that same kind of love, it requires us to fully encompass it through everything we do in our lives – *that we walk according to His commandments*.

John uses the term commandment four times, emphasising that doing what God says is not optional (or rather, that God has not made it optional for us to love one another). He then spells out for us exactly what the commandment is “...*this is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it...*” (2:1:6 NKJV). The commandment is that we love one another, just as Christ loves us. And the commandment is also that we practice it – *walk in it!*

Warning Against False Teachers

The letter moves to John’s primary purpose in writing – the warning against the false teachers “...*for many false teachers have gone out into the world...*” (2:1:7 NKJV). Again, John does not tell us specifically who they are, but he does tell us about their practices “...*who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh...*” (2:1:7 NKJV). This is similar to 1:4:1-3 so he almost certainly has the same group of people in mind, and he also gives them the same description as 1:2:18 “...*This is a deceiver and an antichrist...*” (2:1:7 NKJV). John uses the present tense *as coming in the flesh* to describe their doctrine rather than the past tense *has come in the flesh*.

What the present tense emphasizes is the timeless character of the event (cf. Jn 3:31; 6:14; 11:27). It is not simply an event in history but an “abiding truth,” defining the union between humanity and deity that is present in Jesus’ person. This union is not limited to Jesus’ historical manifestation but remains true of him as the one at the right hand of the Father. (NIVBC)

It is probable that the false teachers had been in Ephesus, and had now moved on to the other churches, and the warning is so that the churches can be aware (and beware!) for when they might arrive on the scene. John is plain – they are deceivers (their motivation was deception 1:2:26) and antichrist (the opposite to Christ).

The consequences of following the false teachers should not be underestimated. It is not a trivial issue “... *Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully...*” (2:1:8 NIV). The deception from the false teachers will result in us losing our eternal reward. But note that John says that we can *lose what we have worked for*. There are several things that are evident from this verse:

1. John clearly has in mind our salvation, as is evident from the next verse.
2. It is possible for us to lose our salvation. Some people teach that it is not possible for a christian to fall away and lose their salvation (“once saved – always saved”), and they base this on Jesus’ assurance “no one is able to snatch them out of my hand” (Jn 10:27-29). But Jesus just said that no-one can take our salvation away from us – He didn’t say that we can’t give it up!
3. Our salvation comes from our working at it. This does not mean that we are rewarded with salvation because of our good works (ie that we have “earned” it), for that would be salvation by works, which Paul said is not possible (Rom 11:6; Eph 2:8-9). But that doesn’t mean that we don’t have to *do* anything – and that is John’s point! We have to work at our salvation – we have to work towards putting sin out of our lives; we have to work at helping and serving others; we have to work at growing as christians (c/f 2 Pet 1:5-9). Peter’s point is clear – that these things don’t just appear – they take work! And John says that if the false teachers deceive us, then all of the work is in vain!

John provides a very stern warning “... *Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son...*” (2:1:9 NKJV). We cannot claim to belong to God if we do not keep His teaching. In the specific situation, that was the problem with the false teachers. And it can also be a problem with us! We must have authority for everything that we teach – and that authority lies only *in the doctrine of Christ*. The idea that John is bringing is one who is *pushing the limits*, and is rendered in the NIV “...*runs ahead...*” or in other translations “...*goes too far...*”.

John may well imply that the false teachers claimed that their doctrine was more progressive than that of the older teachers; if so, with John their progress was in the wrong direction.¹

There has been much discussion about what is “the doctrine of Christ”, with some claiming that the sole test is the one that John places here – *if any confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh* – and therefore we have liberty in all other teaching. Other maintain that it is the doctrine that Christ (alone) taught, and that the teaching of the apostles is therefore excluded. Roberts adds:

The Greek here is capable of being understood subjectively (“the doctrine which Christ taught”) or objectively (“the doctrine about Christ”), and the question is very difficult to decide. ... Undoubtedly the majority of commentators are on the side of the subjective genitive... In either case the practical application is about the same. If the subjective idea was what John intended, it was in terms of the denial of the incarnation of Jesus as a part of that doctrine.²

The apostles were empowered with authority from Jesus (Jn 15:20; 1 Cor 2:13; 14:37), and the things that they taught were the very words of God. The application for us, is that we must remain with the teaching that Christ has authorised, both those spoken by the Lord, and those delivered to us by His apostles (2 Pet 3:2). If we go outside of this authority, we withdraw ourselves from God.

¹ Roberts, p.163

² Roberts, p.164

Fellowship with False Teachers

The false teachers denied Jesus. John puts the flip-side to the argument about remaining true to Christ “...*If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not welcome him into your house nor greet him...*” (2:1:10 NKJV). The warning is stern and explicit – we are not to have fellowship with false teachers. The idea here is not to have “*no interaction*” with them, but rather “*not to welcome them as christians*”. Remember that John has described these people as *antichrist*, and welcoming and accepting them as christians is equivalent to saying that their teaching (and their practices – remember that they did not even understand what *agape* love entailed) was acceptable. He confirms this thought by saying “...*for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds...*” (2:1:11 NKJV).

But ought not persons who had gone so far astray be dealt with all the more in love? Do they not require even more by way of grace, mercy, and forgiveness of Christ? At the personal level, Christians should always be prepared to turn the other cheek and seek tirelessly to be reconciled with others. But only those whose own faith is secure and whose understanding beyond corruption can do this. Unfortunately, the community of the elect lady was not yet in this position. It was not mature enough to deal with such deadly deviations; in fact, it was more likely that it might be destroyed by them. The responsibility of parents may furnish an analogy. Parents must discriminate as to whom even among their relatives they entertain in their home. Some relatives might be of such questionable character as to menace the moral, spiritual, and physical welfare of the children. Such relatives must be excluded. Parents must balance their concern for their relatives with their responsibility for their children. It is important to note that John does not suggest that the elect lady and her children deal with the false teachers in hatred or retaliate against them. Instead, he counsels that the false teachers be kept at a distance lest their heresy destroy the young church. (NIVBC)

The point and purpose of the letter is to instruct the church(es) that fellowship with the false teachers cannot be accepted, and further – it must not even be contemplated.

Final Greetings

The letter concludes with a short statement, and is truncated as if John has run out of space on the page “...*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...*” (2:1:12 NIV). John has much more to say, and he clearly personally knows those to whom he is writing. He closes with the idea of sharing *joy* with the disciples, and it is a common bond that he mentioned earlier in the letter – the *great joy to find some of your children walking in truth...* (2:1:4)

The brethren (presumably in Ephesus) send their greetings, and must have been fully acquainted with the fact that John was writing, and who he was writing to.