

*Walking in the Truth (2 Jn 1.1-13)*

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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,<sup>2</sup> because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:<sup>3</sup> Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.<sup>4</sup> I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting,<sup>11</sup> for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> The children of your elect sister greet you. (2 Jn 1.1-13 ESV)

## Introduction

One thing that unites the Fourth Gospel with 1, 2, and 3 John is the high doctrine of Christ that these writings contain. There is marked contrast to antichrist and all who walk in darkness while professing to walk in the truth. Accordingly, 2 John (our text today) cautions believers regarding those who are out to deceive them. There is brevity and urgency to the letter since John (in v. 12) makes the point that he has more to write (this letter is to be continued) and he expects to visit them soon (also v. 12, so he can instruct them **face to face**). Though brief, the letter gives powerful incentive to living as Christians on the solid rock of God's excellent word. An appropriate title is "walking in the truth." But if we want to stress the imperatives that run through the text, we may title it, "walk in truth." It is your duty to so walk. In outline, we can see two main ideas in this short book of only 13 verses: the apostle presents us with the foundation for a walk in the truth and then an exhortation to a walk in the truth.

## I. The foundation for a walk in truth

The opening section of the letter (up to v. 4) is introductory. It presents some initial thoughts that indicate the theme of truth. The introduction includes salutation, affirmation, and commendation.

### A. Salutation

A salutation includes references to both the writer and reader, and here with a measure of ambiguity.

#### 1. On one hand, the writer identifies himself somewhat ambiguously

In verse 1, he calls himself **the elder**. A comparison of the letters, the status of John the beloved apostle, Peter's description of the apostles as elders and Peter's designation of himself, like John, as *the elder* (1 Pet 5.1) all contribute to the conclusion that the writer is the youngest of the apostles and the brother of James (Mat 4.21). And yes, they are James and John, the sons of Zebedee who seek greatness for themselves when Jesus vividly predicts His imminent suffering at Jerusalem (Mk 10.32-35). That is now many years in the past, and John has made much progress in serving Christ. In every way, his life of service and the concerns of His writings reveal a sharp contrast between the self-centered young apostle-disciple and this very loving (others-centered) seasoned apostle-pastor (as we have seen in his first letter). Thus, "the elder" is

not so much a literal designation of age (though he is no doubt up there in years) as it is an official title indicating a place in the church family. This elderly person in the family, virtually a father to the church, is a ruling elder.

2. On the other hand, the writer identifies the reader somewhat ambiguously  
So we need to discuss the style and then the substance of this identification.

1. First, consider the style

Interestingly, the readers to whom John addresses his letter are (1b): **the elect lady and her children**. It seems best to take the address to the elect lady to be to the church and not to an individual. What we have is rich personification like the figurative flare of John's references to women in the Book of Revelation (i.e., the woman clothed with the sun, 12, and the great harlot, 17). It is similar then to OT references to Israel as a woman and Jerusalem as the mother of the children of Israel. In Galatians (4.9) the church or new Jerusalem is our mother and in Ephesians, the church is the bride of Christ (5.32).

Granted many, perhaps most of the details of the text can be read either way (figuratively or literally), but it would be unusual to engage the internal workings of a particular family if John intends to be literal. In 2.13, he says, **the children of your chosen sister greet you**. The text places John with the sister of the elect lady giving greetings to her. If literal, then the greeting is from the elect lady's nieces and nephews, along with greetings between cousins. That seems ill-fitted. On the whole, it makes better sense to hear in these words a family emphasis on brother and sister saints who are a part of sister churches. That emphasis is lost if John is writing to an individual family. In the third letter when John speaks literally to individuals, his context is the church that is explicitly made up of brothers and sisters (3 Jn 10). Also, citation of the commandment from the beginning (in 2 Jn 6) takes us back to Jesus and His disciples and suggests that disciples are in view here in 2 John, just as they are in view in 1 John (2.7 where John refers to **the commandment you had from the beginning**). What John refers to are churches that radiate the warmth of the best kind of family life; the best kind because not all families maintain warm relations. That takes unselfish hard work. The assemblies (i.e., the churches) of the NT are not merely gatherings of diverse people, but they are distinct and special families of saints who relate to churches in other locations as sister churches in a family of churches throughout the world; and all constitute one body.

The personification is a matter of rich literary style on one hand and of discretion on the other in turbulent times as evident in all of John's writings and especially notable in the Book of Revelation. The style no doubt is tactical in the interest of truth in opposition to deceivers.

2. Second, consider the substance

John further describes the reader as the object of love, of his love along with that of others. The elect lady and her children are those, he says (1c): **whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth**. The theme of love is quite central in this letter, but truth governs love since the love is in truth. Also, being loved by all who know the truth is similar to the statement in 1 John 5.1 that **everyone who loves the Father loves whomever has been born of him**. Here the point is that everyone who knows the truth loves whoever else knows the truth. This is family love by the new birth that has its roots in knowing the truth; it is love **in truth** (hence the theme of walking in truth that he is introducing).

The readers (the elect lady and her children) are objects of deep love. This is made clear in verse 2: **because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever**. Looking back to love in verse one, this clause explains why John and others love the church of the elect lady. They love the church in the truth and all who know the truth love the church because they are of the truth

that abides forever. In other words, the Spirit of truth who **abides in us** bears witness to the truth that remains with us permanently as the gift of the completed work of Christ. So, the salutation with its focus on writer and reader shows that the main concern of this letter is loving and knowing the truth that abides in us forever. The overarching concern is walking in the truth.

B. Next in the introduction is affirmation

At first reading, 1.3 appears to be a typical benediction; that is, a prayer that petitions the gifts of grace, mercy, and peace. However, as we read the text, notice why this is not a benediction but an affirmation instead: **Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.** He does *not say, may* grace, mercy and peace be with us; instead, *he affirms that they will be* with us. The ground of his affirmation is the work of God just mentioned about the abiding of the truth in us forever. It is the anointing (of 1 Jn 2.27) that accounts for the confidence of John that the blessings of grace, mercy, and peace in truth and love will surely and certainly continue to be poured out on the church. It is because of the efficacy of the work of Christ in its accomplishment by His propitiatory action, and the certainty is because of the application of His work by the gift of the Spirit (1 Jn 2.2; 3.24). This affirmation of confidence has its basis in the gift of the Spirit *to* Christ as the reward of His death and *from* Christ to the church to carry the covenant of redemption on to completion.

Again, truth in an intimate bond with love underlies all that John says.

Thus, John can say, I love you and all who know the truth love you as well because of the Spirit... because all born of God love the people born of God (1 Jn 5.1). This is a permanent state of affairs among the people of God because of the effectual atonement of Jesus and the effectual working of the Holy Spirit. In this benediction turned into an affirmation, John places a solid rock of promise underneath the believer's future: God's **grace, mercy and peace will be with us** as we make our way in life and take the steps of our walk across time.

C. The introductory words end with commendation (following salutation and affirmation)

Here the apostle talks about his joy over those who walk in the truth (v. 4): **I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father.** This is not referring to some in the sense of few, nor to some in a contrast of "some are...and some are not." The word some is particular and specific. He is commending those he knows from the congregation. To "find" them indicates a discovery about them. It is like saying, "when I met them it gave me great joy to hear first hand of their walk in the truth doing the Father's will." Finding some to be believers does not necessitate that others are not believers. For example, if you refer to a collection of ten marbles that are all blue, but for some reason you hone in on five of them, you may very well say that some of the marbles are blue, and that is true - without implying that some are not blue (if all are blue it is true that some are blue). Granted, there may be people who have left the church and there may be people who have a false profession, but John does not speak to these things. He is simply giving a commendation regarding specific children of the local church that he has come to know to be walking in the truth and that gives him great joy.

In summary, the introductory comments of the letter-opening (1-4) express confidence and joy on the part of the writer to the reader about walking in the truth. These comments give the basis of a great start in life for these saints. They have a firm foundation and on it John seeks to build a strong edifice. In other words, the efficacious work of the triune God front loads the letter with indicatives and promises that ground the duties and imperatives that constitute the rest of this letter.

## II. The exhortation to walk in truth

We turn now to the exhortation that explains the how of this walk. He explains specific duties; the “how to” is by obeying particular imperatives, by taking up specific duties: of love, watchfulness, and separation.

### A. First is the duty of love

In verses 5-6 we read: **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.**<sup>6</sup> **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.** The command to love (and love is a command) goes back to the beginning of the gospel of Jesus and His summons to **love one another as I have loved you** (Jn 13.34). It is as our Lord proclaimed (Jn 14.15): **if you love me, you will keep my commandments.** Obedience to the commands of Christ goes hand in hand as genuine proof of love for Him. To walk in truth therefore immediately connects with the Ten Commandments and their summary in the two commandments to love God and the neighbor. Of course, as one-anothering love, this pertains in a special way to all in the household of faith.

### B. The next duty is that of watchfulness

Thus, in verses 7-8, John says: **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.**<sup>8</sup> **Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.** We need to consider the imperative to watch yourselves (v. 8) in close connection with the deceivers who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh (v. 7). It goes without saying that a loving Christian family is essential to deal with the antichrist, but another essential is watchfulness. We must always be on the alert to the schemes and devices of those who seek to deceive. And we are to do so with a purpose, namely, that the work of the apostles not be lost, that is, as the NAS has it: **that you might not lose what we have accomplished;** i.e., that there be a set back in the progress that has been made to date. Such a set back would mean that the fullness of the reward of your walk with God will suffer; then you will not have the full rewarding life of fellowship with the Father and the Son (that goes with having the Father and the Son, 2 Jn 9 with 1 Jn 1.3). If you get entangled with the antichrist, you will walk off the path into what Bunyan calls “by-path meadow” to be caught by giant despair and put in his nasty and stinking dungeon.

### C. The last duty is separation

You will notice that verse 9 explains the true state of affairs for those of the antichrist: **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.** “Going on ahead” refers to going about one’s walk. It is about going forward in life, but doing so without abiding in the teaching of Christ. To abide in His teachings is to grow in knowledge of His word regarding who Jesus is as God the Son incarnate, and to keep growing in obedience to Him by living under His absolute authority. If someone does not abide in Christ in this way then whatever his or her claims to fellowship with God may be, this person does not have God, does not know or walk with God, but walks in darkness.

This is tricky. It involves the deception of claiming to know God while denying the truth. You do not walk in the truth when you do not honor Christ and His authority in relation to every detail of your life. There is much confusion in the attempts at deception that operate by camouflage. Hence, we come to the specific duty of separation (10-11): **If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting,**<sup>11</sup> **for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.** Because of the trickery that seeks to erode faith in Christ,

Christians are duty bound to take the decisive action of denying hospitality to those who (v. 7) **do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.**

The duty this requires of us seems straightforward enough on a first reading. We are to refuse hospitality to anyone who comes our way denying Jesus, and we are not even to greet him as a friend. He does wicked works so showing hospitality and friendship implicates us in his sins. At the least we support the evil by supporting the evil-doer. On reflection, however, some pertinent questions arise.

1) What happened to love that is a strong emphasis in the context?

We must remember that it is love among the people of God that John stresses. It is love between those born of God who confess that Jesus is the Son of God who has come in the flesh. Those who love God the Son incarnate abide in the teaching of Christ and they have both the Father and the Son. Of course, we are to do good to all men but especially to those of the household of faith (Gal 6.10). So, here we have a case where truth seems to trump love.

2) Can this simply refer to separation of the kind that the Psalms mention?

Psalm 1 tells of the blessed man who separates from the ungodly: he does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, he does not stand in the way of sinners; he does not sit in the seat of scoffers. But this is not literal dissociation; it refers to separating oneself from their deeds. That is the same idea that Isaiah presents in 52.11 (quoted by Paul, 2 Cor 6.17) be separate from them... touch no unclean thing. The separation is from their evil deeds. It is not from them literally since we have no calling to be hermits or monastics.

3) Is separation from an immoral person who bears the name of a brother (1 Cor 5.11) more akin to 2 Jn 10?

This idea has merit because of the larger context of John regarding false prophets and professors that are both inside and outside of the churches. We then can think of the people who come to you with a different (unorthodox) teaching but who carry themselves in such a way that believers may think of them as fellow saints. But when they open their mouths it becomes evident quickly (or eventually) that they oppose the truth of Jesus. Again, this pushes us back to watchfulness. So, strictly speaking they are not outsiders in their profession; then they are really so-called brothers. How we are to treat them is different from how we deal with believers who sin and it is different from how we are to deal with out and out unbelievers. We may show hospitality even to an enemy, but we are not to show hospitality to those who feign faith in Christ but deny that He is God come in the flesh. We must not forget the duty of love. We have to be discerning; we must make distinctions with loving care, but we must also preserve the proclamation of the truth by decisive separation from the deceptions of antichrist, if we are going to walk in the truth.

There are times that call for breaking of ties of fellowship and hospitality. Many seek to trample the gospel, God's beloved Son, and God's beloved people under their feet. Eyeball to eyeball, you know that Jesus is God by the testimony of the Spirit within, and this false teacher tells you not to believe it; he says "Jesus is not God in the flesh." He may do so with orthodox sounding words. He sins the sin that is to death and you know it unquestionably (1 Jn 5.16). At the least, John says you do not need to pray for him. For now, like Jesus, the apostle teaches that you are to shake the dust off your feet in a virtual consignment of these people to the day of judgment (Mat 10.14-15). We must also factor in our Lord's command not to cast your pearls before swine. Obviously, there is no rush to judgment here for charity and non-censoriousness must guide us. There is no temporal execution; nor a giving over to Satan explicitly (as in 1 Cor 5.5). The sin is in your face, you know Jesus to be God in the flesh and the antichrist seeks to

deceive you into denying Jesus yourself. But this you cannot do because you know Christ by the Spirit's witness (5.7), you are kept from this sin by the new birth so that you cannot sin; i.e., the sin to death (3.9), and Jesus will not let the evil one and his antichrists even touch you to your eternal harm (5.18). Instead, He will grant you grace, mercy, and peace (2 Jn 3).

#### Application

When we try to apply this text, our thoughts may be pulled in a number of directions at the same time. Granted, it is important that we not get so caught up in truth that we lose the love so emphasized in John's writings. Here in the second letter, John opens with a warm greeting to the chosen lady, which is to the elect church and all who make up its membership. He says, the children of God over here greet you as the children of God over there. Again, we cannot miss the dimension of the new birth that brings us into the family God as His dear children. Therefore, we must identify ourselves in this way while keeping an appropriate distance from those who deny the truth that they profess to believe. This is the context of writing and going beyond writing to personal conversation that closes the letter (12-13): **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.**<sup>13</sup> **The children of your elect sister greet you.**

**Let us fall down before God the Father and before Jesus Christ the Son of the Father to worship in truth and to go forth from worship to walk in truth and love by the commandments; may the Holy Spirit enable us to faithfully take up the duties of love, watchfulness, and separation to the glory of the triune God both now and forevermore, amen.**