

John's Letter *to the Chosen Lady*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Exod. 20:1–17; Rom. 6:17; 2 Thess. 2:10; Heb. 13:2; 2 John; Rev. 2:14, 15; 14:12.

Memory Text: “Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9, NASB).

John's second letter resembles the first one in many respects. Although shorter, the same vocabulary is used, the same themes occur, and the same concern for believers prevails. A personal touch is also found in both.

However, in contrast to the first letter, the second clearly is cast in a letter form, with both a formal introduction and conclusion. The main body contains praise, an exhortation to love and to walk according to the commandments, and a section dealing with the antichrists.

The shortness of 2 John, as well as 3 John, may have been dictated by the size of a papyrus sheet. If this is true, the apostle must have weighed his words carefully as the Holy Spirit moved upon Him to write.

The Week at a Glance: What is John's basic message, and how is it like his first one? How does he relate the concept of “love” to the concept of “truth”? What is the link between love and keeping the commandments? Why does John take the issue of false teachings so seriously? Why does John tell members not to be hospitable to false teachers?

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 19.

In Love and Truth

Read 2 John. What similarities to 1 John do you find in it? What's the essential message?

A cursory reading of 2 John suggests that the letter is addressed to a group of believers (as opposed to a single woman). This makes good sense, because in other places in the New Testament the church is portrayed as a woman (*Eph. 5:22–32, Rev. 12:1–6*). These believers, then, are mature Christians, not literal children.

Read 2 John 1–4. What word appears again and again, and how is John using it? See also 2 Thess. 2:10.

Notice, too, that John's use of the word *truth* is combined with *love* in verses 1 and 3. To understand the nature of true love among Christians, a qualifier is needed, namely *truth*. Love can be interpreted in a purely emotional, even sensual and superficial way. Christian love is “true” love, love expressed in the context of truth.

If we talk about truth, we are reminded of God; of Jesus, who is the truth (*John 14:6*); and of the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit is with the believers forever (*John 14:16*), so truth is with them forever (*2 John 2*). Both truth and love ultimately point back to God and belong together in Christian faith and experience.

At the same time, truth and love seem to form the main theme of 2 John. Love is further discussed in verses 5 and 6. Truth is necessary to discern deceptions and their results (*vss. 7, 8*) and to abide in the teaching of Christ (*vss. 9, 10*).

We often look at the concept of “love” as something good in and of itself, regardless of the context. When, however, can love be very destructive? Have you ever experienced the reality of how love, outside of truth, can be so terrible? How does that experience help you better understand the importance of love in the context of truth, as opposed to outside it?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** 2 John 6

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend that God commands us to walk in both truth and love.

Feel: Experience the joy that comes from walking in love and truth.

Do: Distance ourselves from falsehood and heresy.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: Truth and Love

A Truth and love form the themes in 2 John. How do these two interrelate? Discuss how this ties in with the themes in 1 John.

B What happens when truth is expressed without love, or vice versa?

C Returning to the problem of heresy, John deals with how we should relate to those who promote false teachings. Make a list of the principles and how they relate to today's challenges.

II. Feel: Joy Rooted in Love and Truth

A Cultivating obedience is not easy. What is love's role as a motivator?

B Turn to your neighbor and describe the joy that is rooted in love and truth.

III. Do: Keeping a Healthy Distance

Hospitality is a Christian virtue, but there are times when we need to place a healthy distance between us and people who do not follow the truth. Brainstorm ways of:

- separating yourself from heresy.
- showing Christlike love for the person cherishing false beliefs without misleading others through your actions.

► **Summary:** John reminds the believers that love finds its expression in keeping the commandments. When confronted with error, we should distance ourselves from it so as not to mislead others.

Walking According to the Commandments (*2 John 4–6*)

Verse 4 is an encouragement for both the church and John. It is stimulating and encouraging for church members to hear that the elder rejoices greatly that they are “walking in the truth” (*NIV*). It motivates them to continue their Christian life “in the truth, just as the Father has commanded” (*NIV*) them. The commandment to walk in the truth may be found in 1 John 3:23, where he is calling us to believe in Jesus and to love one another.

How are love and the commandments related to each other? See *2 John 5, 6*. Why is this especially important to us as Seventh-day Adventists? See also *Rev. 14:12*.

After the rejoicing (*vs. 4*) comes a request that at the same time is an exhortation (*vss. 5, 6*). John again talks about a commandment (*vs. 5*). It is the commandment (singular) to love one another. So, he moves from the concept of “commandment” to the concept of “love,” and indeed this commandment has love as its content.

In verse 6 he continues the other way around, namely, with love, and moves on to commandments (plural). Love is shown by keeping God’s commandments. In other words, we have this commandment, and this commandment is to love one another, and we reveal this love by keeping the commandments.

How does keeping the commandments (*Exod. 20:1–17*) reveal love for one another?

How interesting that something such as keeping the law, the rules, and the dos and the don’ts would be so closely linked with love. And yet, it makes perfect sense. Love isn’t just what we feel; love is what we do; it’s how we act; it’s how we relate to others. Though it is more than just obeying the Ten Commandments, true love cannot be separated from the principles found in them.

Think about someone you love. How do you treat that person? What things do you say and do that reveal your love? In what ways could you even better show your love to that person? How does your own selfishness sometimes get in the way of showing this love as you know you should?

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: As Christians we have a duty to preserve and protect the truth.

Just for Teachers: In this short letter, the apostle John shows deep concern about false teachers compromising the truth of the gospel. Help class members ask themselves the question, “Why is the idea of ‘truth’ so important to my spiritual walk?”

Nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously declared, “There are no facts, only interpretations.” In his influential philosophical work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he ridicules traditional Judeo-Christian ideas of absolute moral values. His fictional prophet Zarathustra proclaims, “God is dead.”—http://www.en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Thus_Spoke_zarathustra.

Nietzsche’s view of truth and morality pervades today’s society. How often have you heard, “What’s true for you may not be true for me”? Or, “If it works for you, that’s fine. But it doesn’t work for me”?

According to recent surveys, moral relativism is on the rise. Among Americans—including those who describe themselves as “born-again Christians”—64 percent of adults and 83 percent of teenagers say that truth is always relative to the person and their circumstances. Only 6 percent of teenagers say that truth is absolute.—<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=106>.

Yet in 2 John, the apostle fiercely exhorts Christian believers to protect the truth—to preserve the integrity of the gospel.

Consider This: Take a few moments to ask yourself these questions: How can we really know truth? Why is truth so important to both individual believers and Christian communities? What is our role in preserving truth?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: First-century Christians lived and worshiped in conditions very different from those experienced by most Christians today. Explore with your class how learning how to “live the truth in

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Going Beyond the Teaching of Christ

(2 John 7–9)

Read 2 John 7–9. What is John warning about here? What can be the results of falling for the deceptions he's warning about?

With verses 7 through 9 we are back to the deceivers and their false understanding of Jesus. It seems to be the same situation that we have already encountered in 1 John. It is so bad that many people have left the church and even have become "deceivers" themselves. Sure, there are those who are still walking in the truth (*vs. 4*), but a shepherd mourns for everyone who has left God and His church.

The antichrists' views of Jesus differ from the apostles' teaching. Church members have to watch out in order not to be affected by them and their false views. John is very clear here, too, that believers can lose their way and that there's no such thing as "once saved, always saved."

Read 2 John 9. What is he saying about the importance of having correct "doctrine"? See also Matt. 16:12; Acts 2:42; Rom. 6:17; Rev. 2:14, 15.

John is under no illusion that doctrine does not matter. For him, false teaching can lead to the loss of one's eternal life. Thus, doctrine matters!

In our passage it is obviously the apostles' teaching about Jesus that is being challenged. Those who accept this biblical teaching and faithfully remain in it have the Father and the Son. God the Father and Jesus are placed on the same level. The rejection of the teaching about Jesus leads to a loss of the relationship with the Father.

What has been your own experience with false teachers and false doctrines? Were you able to see, especially in the beginning, where these teachings could have led you? What have you learned from these experiences that could help others struggling with something similar?

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love” is a challenge that transcends time and circumstances.

Bible Commentary

I. The Importance of Truth (*Review 2 John 1–4 and Ephesians 4:14–16 with the class.*)

Read aloud 2 John 1–4. How many times does the writer mention the word *truth*? What does he imply about the importance of truth in the life of a faith community? Ask someone to read aloud Ephesians 4:14–16.

Consider This: In what ways does a common understanding of truth strengthen a church community and allow it to function as God intended?

Although the writer of 2 John doesn’t identify the recipients of his letter, it’s probable that they shared the difficulties faced by many Christians of the era. Roman governor and historian Tacitus, writing some 64 years after Christ, referred to Christians as “a class hated for their abominations.” —<http://www.probe.org/context/view/18/77>. Ellen White writes that Christians were “condemned as rebels against the empire, as foes of religion, and pests to society.”—*The Great Controversy*, p. 40.

Discuss the Following Propositions: Was truth—correct doctrine—important to John, in part, because it was a “glue” that helped strengthen and unify these embattled communities? Today, is the truth valued more in areas where freedom to worship is threatened? Why, or why not? In what ways could acceptance by society make us complacent about preserving and sharing truth?

II. Knowing Truth (*Review John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 with the class.*)

A common view in today’s postmodern society is that absolute truth is unknowable. Those who insist that they know truth are seen as intolerant, arrogant, or worse, as dangerous fanatics. Yet, the writer of 2 John assumes not only that truth can be known but that it has already been given to the church (*see 2 John 1, 2, 4*).

Read John 14:6 and 6:35. What did Jesus say about the nature of truth and how a person can approach truth? Do His words seem intolerant or exclusive?

Read Acts 4:12 and 1 Corinthians 15:12–19. Can Christianity ever compromise its claims of exclusive truth?

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Refraining From Hospitality? (*2 John 10, 11*)

The Bible sees great value in hospitality (*Heb. 13:2, 1 Pet. 4:9*). Jesus mingled with tax collectors, Pharisees, and others who may not always have had their theology or their lifestyle straight. How does such a call fit with what John is saying in *2 John 10, 11*? See also *Matt. 10:14, 15; 18:15–17*.

Although hospitality is a Christian virtue, there are limitations. If hospitality leads to directly or indirectly supporting false doctrines, it must be abandoned. In the first century A.D., teachers were traveling around, preaching in various places, and staying with church members who would provide food and lodging.

If such a teacher would propagate false doctrines, hospitality would be understood as an encouragement of his position and would actually help his work. Furthermore, church members who were wavering between the apostolic teaching and the false ideas could be puzzled or could even make a wrong decision if they saw a prominent church member letting a deceiver stay with him or her.

John is not proposing to hate these people or to avoid any contact with them, but we must be aware of the fact that our behavior could be understood as endorsement of ideas opposed to truth. If this is the case, we must be very careful.

It has been suggested that in verses 10 and 11 John is concerned not so much with the behavior of an individual believer as with that of the entire church and that the “house” mentioned in verse 10 is not a private dwelling place but the place where the church meets for worship. The church should not encourage a teacher who preaches heresy.

In short, to welcome a false teacher would be perceived as encouragement of what he or she presents. Today we may have lost the sense of how problematic heresies can be. It is considered by some as judgmental or arrogant even to talk about “heresy” at all, although Scripture addresses this topic frequently. John reminds us that there is a basic difference between truth and error.

Think about how your actions impact others. Think about how easily your example can influence others for good or for evil. What kind of example of Christ do you present? In what ways could you do better?

Learning Cycle C O N T I N U E D**III. Protecting Truth** (*Review 1 Corinthians 15:12–19 with the class.*)

Many scholars believe that John was referring to the false doctrine of Docetism, which claimed Christ was not truly human. “Docetism” comes from the Greek word *dokeo*, which means “to appear or seem.” According to this doctrine, Christ only appeared or seemed to be human.

Consider This: John uses strong words to describe those teaching error. How does the specific nature of this heresy affect the strength of his warning? (*Read 1 Cor. 15:12–19.*) What are the attitudes or teachings today within the Christian community that threaten to undermine the centrality of Christ and His ministry of salvation, and why?

► STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

1 Why is the truth of the gospel more than a set of doctrinal propositions? How is it a person—Jesus Christ? Why is it both? Give reasons for your answers. Review 2 John 1, 2. How does John define truth? Why is truth more than doctrinal orthodoxy? How is it also something more relational and personal, as in living in close connection with the One who is all truth?

2 John suggests that knowing and living the truth will make us loving (*2 John 4–6*). How does a zeal for the truth inevitably produce loving actions? Why does John link these so closely? How is the truth John refers to closely connected with who Christ is? What is the connection between the truth and His character and ministry?

Activity:

Consider these quotes from prominent Christians:

“I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. . . . We are called by God to conquer this country. We don’t want equal time. We don’t want pluralism.”—Randall Terry, former Evangelical leader (<http://mediamatters.org/items/200503220001>).

“The need to exercise true tolerance towards others’ beliefs does not mean that one has to champion the irrational idea that all views are equally

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Communicating With One Another

(2 John 12, 13)

With verses 12 and 13 we have reached the end of 2 John. These verses form the conclusion of the letter, and they allow us to see John's personal interest in his audience and his desire to meet with these believers personally.

Look at what John has written in 2 John 12, 13. What advantages are there to speaking face-to-face, as opposed to a written letter? What hint can you find from his expression "that our joy may be full" as to why he wanted to meet with them? See also Acts 2:42–47.

The message that John communicates is quite strong. When it comes to the antichrists, John leaves no room for negotiation or a compromise. We are reminded of Paul's attitude when he wrote to the Galatians (*Gal. 1:6–9*).

John may have been able to share his message orally, but there also are advantages to a written form of communication:

- Letters by the apostles were regarded to have special importance and authority and were taken seriously.
- The letter may have reached the audience earlier than a personal visit would have. The urgency of the situation demanded a quick response.
- The message was preserved for other churches and later generations that found themselves in similar situations.
- A letter can be drafted very carefully and often can be more precise than an oral presentation.
- The Holy Spirit prompted him to record his message in writing.

Despite all this, John still wanted to meet with them face-to-face.

Why is face-to-face contact often so important for developing good relationships? What are the advantages of this kind of personal contact? What kind of example of personal contact did Jesus leave us? How can you improve your face-to-face dealings with others?

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true.”—Joseph Farinaccio, *Faith With Reason: Why Christianity Is True* (Pennsville, N.J.: Bookspeccs Publishing, 2002), p. 12.

“Unity in necessary things; liberty in doubtful things; charity in all things.”—Peter Meiderlin (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_necessariis,_in_dubiis,_libertas,_in_omnibus_caritas).

For Christians, what are the limits of tolerance? How far should we tolerate different ideas about truth within our faith community? How should we relate to the truth claims of others in society? If class size permits, divide into small groups and ask each group to develop a list of principles that should guide us in balancing “live and let live” with the need to correct others in love.

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Conclude your study by challenging class members to move beyond theory and “live the truth in love” within their daily lives.

“Truth is hard if it isn’t softened by love,” writes theologian John Stott. “And love is soft if it isn’t strengthened by truth. We need this combination of truth and love. . . . And of course there’s only one way in which to grow in both, and that is through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth, and the first fruit of the Spirit is love.”
<http://www.episcopalian.org/efac/articles/essentials.html>.

Set aside time before the close of class for an extended time of prayer. If the class is large, divide into groups of three or four people and ask those who wish to participate to:

- ❶ Pray for the Holy Spirit’s presence in our church, homes, and lives.
- ❷ Pray for a fresh conviction of the truth that “we have heard from the beginning” (*2 John 6*).
- ❸ Pray that in our everyday lives we will become champions of the truth and of the One who is all truth.
- ❹ Pray that as we live and teach the truth, we will do so with sensitivity to others, with self-control and humility, and, above all, with a spirit of love.

Further Study: Read the following passages: *Gal. 2:11–16; 1 Tim. 4:1–7; 2 Tim. 2:14–19; Rev. 2:1–3, 12–16, 18–25.*

“The apostle teaches that while we should manifest Christian courtesy, we are authorized to call sin and sinners by their right names—that this is consistent with true charity. While we are to love the souls for whom Christ died, and labor for their salvation, we should not make a compromise with sin. We are not to unite with the rebellious, and call this charity. God requires His people in this age of the world to stand, as did John in his time, unflinchingly for the right, in opposition to soul-destroying errors.”—Ellen G. White, *The Sanctified Life*, p. 65.

“The greatest want of the world is the want of men—men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 57.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Discuss the idea that doctrine, or teaching, is not that important, that what matters is how kind and loving and accepting we are. What should we think of this idea?
- ❷ Go back over the idea of how obedience to the Ten Commandments is an expression of love. Try to imagine what it would be like expressing love while in violation of the principles of the Ten Commandments. How well would that work?
- ❸ In class, ask the question “What is truth?” Make sure that the members don’t merely give examples of truth but look for a working definition, one simple expression that covers the whole concept. What can you learn from this exercise?
- ❹ What do you do with the question of “calling sin by its right name”? How can we deal with wayward members without being judgmental or condemnatory? At the same time, are we not shirking our Christian duty if we don’t confront brothers or sisters in the church who are doing wrong? How do we deal with this difficult subject?
- ❺ How well does your local church do in the area of hospitality in general? How can you help the church do better in that area, if need be?