

SECOND JOHN: The Vital Balance

by Ray C. Stedman

The second letter of John is the only letter in the New Testament that was written to a woman. As we can gather from the letter itself, it was written to a mother with several children, perhaps a widow. It appears that she had written to the Apostle John to ask his opinion about certain problems that had come up.

Back in those days, of course, the New Testament was not available as it is to us. The leaders of the churches were dependent upon certain men, called prophets, who went from place to place, preaching the truth. Evidently some of these men had come to the home of this woman, probably in the city of Ephesus, and they had raised certain doctrinal matters which disturbed her. Not knowing quite what to do, she wrote to the Apostle John and asked for his counsel. This letter is his response to her question. As we go through this, we will see how it also answers many of the questions we have today -- especially the question of how to treat people who teach wrong things.

The first six verses present the problem to us and give us John's approach in answering it:

The elder [as John terms himself] to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth, because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us for ever: Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love. I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children following the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. And now I beg you, 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. And this is love, the we follow his commandment; this is the commandment, as you have heard from the beginning, that you follow love. {2 Jn 1:1-6 RSV}

Here John is setting the stage for the answer to this lady's problem. He is gathering together two things that must be taken into consideration in facing a problem of this kind. Two outstanding words are used all through the text. What are they? Truth is the first, isn't it? And love. Truth and love. Notice how he links these two in verse three:

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

This ought to be the characteristic of Christians. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he says the same thing -- that a Christian should learn to speak the truth in love {Eph 4:15 RSV}. The remarkable work of a Christian life is to gather these often opposing things together and keep them in balance.

Now that is our problem as well. Many of us emphasize one, at the expense of the other. We may emphasize truth and center upon doctrinal matters, insisting that the Scriptures be followed carefully, but at the expense of love. When we do this, we are rigid and cold and judgmental -- sometimes even cruel in the way we say things. Even though what we say is exactly right, we are trying to defend the truth of God at the expense of love.

On the other hand, there are those of us who make the mistake of emphasizing love at the expense of truth. They feel that we should accept everyone and everything, being tolerant in all directions. This second group reminds me of the story Dr. H. A. Ironside used to tell about the man who came to church, and on the way out, as he shook hands with the pastor one Sunday morning, he said to him, "Oh Pastor, I want to tell you what a blessing you've been to me since you've been pastor of this church. Why, when I first started here, I didn't have any regard for God, man or the devil. But since you came, I've learned to love all three."

Now the problem is to keep truth and love in balance. This is what you see so beautifully in the Lord Jesus; he

walked in truth and love. He could deal in tenderness with the dissolute sinner, the outcast from society who came to him. And with a blistering word, he could scorch a Pharisee until he turned red with shame, as all the rottenness in that man's inner life was revealed. He spoke the truth and he dealt in love and he kept them in perfect balance.

John says, "When you go to handle a problem of doctrinal error, emphasize both truth and love." A lot of people who read this letter miss these opening words; thus they miss the sanity of balance that pervades the letter.

In the next section, we have the answer to the lady's question:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and antichrist. Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward. Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; for he who greets him shares his wicked work. {2 Jn 1: 7-11}

First, you have to recognize the nature of the error. Two things are said here that describe the fundamental types of Christian perversions. There are only two; all Christian error and heresies gather about one or the other of these.

There are, first of all, those who are deceived about the person of the Lord Jesus. There is one sign of the true redeemer and savior -- he is the one who came from God into the world and became man. The incarnation is an essential doctrine of Christian faith. If you can trace a man's origin from his birth, and you know that he entered this human stream through the normal reproductive faculties, and he claims to be a savior, you can write it off, because he is not God's savior. And if he claims not to believe nor to accept this incarnation of the Lord Jesus, then the man is in error. No matter what else he may say, he is not speaking as the spokesman of God.

All through the New Testament letters, the mighty apostles of our Lord set this incarnation at the center of Christian theology -- the Word becoming man. Everything else gathers around that, the person of the Lord Jesus. John says, if a man does not say that, no matter what else he may say, he is a deceiver. Now he may be deceived as well as being a deceiver, but he is an antichrist. He is against the doctrine of Jesus. Therefore, he is to be recognized for what he is -- a man who is mistaken and trying to deceive others.

There is another type of error, however, that gathers around a misunderstanding or false conception of the teaching of the Lord Jesus:

Any one who goes ahead [literally, goes beyond] and does not abide in the doctrine [the teaching] of Christ does not have God. {2 Jn 1:9}

That is very revealing. That takes care of all groups that hold that the Bible is not an adequate revelation of God, and that say we need something else. Someone with such a view may be very persuasive and sincere. He may be a very great personality. but this is the test: if he does not abide in the doctrine of Christ, then he is not of God.

There are many people today who say that the teachings of the Scriptures are infantile. Modern man has grown beyond all this and can no longer accept these simplistic teachings of the Bible. The modern mind must find satisfaction in more scientific approaches. It cannot rest upon these simple things. Do you see that that is another example of exactly what John is talking about here? Someone who goes beyond, departs from the revelation of Jesus, considering it too simple, and tries to add something to the teachings of the Word of God.

Those are the two types of error; now notice what the danger is. What will happen to you if you fall in with this kind of thing?

Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward. {2 Jn 1:8 RSV}

What do you lose, as a Christian, if you get involved with cults and heresies and liberal approaches that are so widespread? Will you lose your salvation? Not if you are really born again, of course. That rests upon the work of Christ for you. You are not going to lose your place in heaven, nor your redemption, nor your part in the body of Christ. But you do lose a great deal, as John makes clear. You lose the value of your life spent here; you waste your time. You throw away precious moments and years involved in that which is utterly worthless, and which will be displayed at last as wood, hay and stubble, to be consumed in the fire of God's searching gaze. You will lose your reward.

All through the New Testament, this possibility is brought before us. In the book of Revelation, the Apostle John says something similar: "Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown." (Rev. 3:11) These crowns are symbols of authority and honor which are given to those who have made themselves available to the work of God. to those who have given their bodies as a living sacrifice for God to work through.

If you get involved in something that is grounded upon false teaching, all your efforts are wasted. You are building nothing but an imposing facade: it may look very good, but at the end it will crumble and find no acceptance before God.

What do you do about people like this?

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; for he who greets him shares his wicked work. {2 Jn 1:10- 11}

As we read this, let us remember what John has said about truth and love. It is so easy for us who are concerned about the doctrinal matters of Scripture to forsake the courtesy and charity that is expected of every Christian. We interpret a passage like this to mean that we are to slam the door in the face of anyone who offers us some of these heretical ideas, or that we are to order them out of the house the minute they bring up some kind of heretical teaching. If that were the case, it would be impossible even to have foreign students in our homes. If this is what John means, then when we discover that someone is not a Christian, we are not to let him in the house. We would be very offensive people, wouldn't we? We could never extend our friendship to those of another religion who may be visiting in our country. We would be acting in defense of the truth, but not manifesting anything of the grace of love. Well then, what does he mean?

He means that truth should be uttered in love, and love should be bounded by truth. In other words, we are not to receive these people in such a way as to imply that we are authenticating or accepting their teaching. You see, in those days motels did not exist. and inns were very few and far between. When these teachers traveled. they stayed in private homes. So when they went into a home with false teaching, and the person continued to open his home to them, he would be endorsing their doctrine.

But this does not rule out the need for common courtesy, or for a gracious approach to the person. or for the meeting of emergency needs. After all, the parable of the Good Samaritan makes very clear that if someone is in need, it does not make any difference who he is, we are to help him. As long as we can make it clear that we are treating him graciously, thoughtfully. kindly, as a fellow human being, but definitely not endorsing his wrong ideas, then it is perfectly proper for us to have some kind of contact with him -- even a degree of friendship. But we are not to share in his wicked work; that is the idea that John sets before us.

Notice how he underscores the importance of this in his closing verses. He says to her.

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink, but I hope to come to see you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete. {2 Jn 1:12}

It was difficult to write letters in those days. Mails were uncertain, and I suppose the Apostle John, like most of us, found it difficult to sit down and write letters. So he said, "I'm not going to write more, but...BUT -- and this is the reason for the letter -- this matter is so important, that I have taken the time to write it anyhow. There are a lot of other things I would like to discuss, but certainly I could not wait about this."

Then he extends greetings from the Christian family he is evidently staying with, and thus underscores the need in Christian life for both truth and love.

Let us pray that we may so speak and deal with others that we will manifest the graciousness, the gentleness of Christ. Paul says that if a brother is overtaken in a fault, or if someone has strayed from the truth, the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle and understanding. This is no encouragement, then, to rigidity and narrowness and bigotry, saying hateful and reviling things.

Do you remember the nursery rhyme of the gingham dog and the calico cat? I do not remember just how it went, but I remember how it ended. They ate each other up. I am afraid that is what may happen to some of these Christian groups, so-called, in their approach to one another. Let us not be that way -- rigid, judgmental, scorching. We need to display love.

But our love must not be so wide, so tolerant, that it excludes the great fact that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. No other one has come. No other savior has been sent. He alone is the answer to humanity's hopelessness.

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