

2 John “A Letter to a Mother and Her Children”**

Main Idea: In the letter we call 2 John, John wrote and gave three very practical messages to someone he identifies as “the elect lady.” These three messages are fitting words for mothers today who are serious about pleasing God.

- I. John gave her a commendation (4).
 - A. Notice what he did not say.
 1. Your children are famous and wealthy.
 2. Your children can provide you with security.
 - B. Notice what does bring joy.
 1. Your children are walking in the truth.
 2. Your children are living lives guided by the person and word of Christ.
- II. John gave her a command (5-6).
 - A. We must love one another (5).
 - B. We must walk in obedience to His commands (6).
 1. Love isn’t simply a feeling.
 2. Love is choosing to obey Jesus in the way I treat you.
- III. John gave her a caution (7-11).
 - A. Make sure you finish the job well (7-9).
 1. Some abandon the person of Christ (7).
 2. Some abandon the teaching of Christ (9).
 - B. Make sure your love is guided by the truth (10-11).
 1. Sometimes love chooses NOT to help.
 2. At all times love chooses to please Christ.

Make It Personal: How is it in your family?

1. Are you committed to loving each other?
2. Are you committed to truth?
3. Are you committed to Christ?

Did you write your mother this Mother’s Day? What can you say, what *should* you say to a mother on this significant day? It’s a tough job being a mother, rewarding yet often challenging, fulfilling yet at times draining. So what words can we share? What is it that a mother needs to hear on a day when the spotlight turns to moms?

In preparation for this message I scanned my Bible, prayerfully looking for a text that would encourage mothers today. My journey took me to some familiar parenting texts (Deuteronomy 5, Proverbs 31, etc). Then I looked at Paul’s teaching on the family in Ephesians. I kept moving and came to Peter’s counsel to wives in 1 Peter 3. I almost didn’t go any further, for I thought, “John didn’t talk about family matters in his epistles.” But I kept going—and I’m glad I did. I came to his second letter, the one we call 2 John and noticed an introduction that grabbed my attention:

*“The elder,
To the chosen lady and her children.”*

“Whoa,” I thought, “A lady and her children? John, an apostle, says he wrote this letter, this *inspired* letter, to a very special mother and her offspring. Sounds like a potential Mother’s Day letter to me...” So I began to look at it more carefully, paying attention to what John told this particular woman, and discovered this, indeed, is a very relevant letter for mothers today.

Indeed, in the letter we call 2 John, John wrote and gave three very practical messages to a recipient he identifies as “the elect lady.” There’s some debate as to whether “the chosen lady and her children” refers to an actual woman or is some kind of

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

code language for a letter written to a church. Some say "elect lady" is a figure of speech referring to an entire church and "your children" refers to the Christians in the church.¹ If you consider the setting, you can guess why John might use a "disguise" in writing to a church. When he penned this, persecution was a very real threat to local churches. Christians were hated and in some cases hunted by hostile authorities.²

On the other hand, this could well be a letter to a godly first century Christian mother. It's warm and personal, and addresses a very practical matter that faced a God-fearing woman in that day. And regardless whether the recipient was a church or an actual woman, the three messages contained provide fitting encouragement for mothers today who are serious about pleasing God (not to mention fathers and anyone else...). Let's look carefully at the three messages John gave to "the chosen lady."

I. John gave her a commendation (4).

If you're looking carefully at your Bible you may be thinking, "You keep referring to John. I don't see his name in the letter." Correct. He identifies himself as "The Elder," a term that describes not simply age, but an official position (Stott). The author was known to his readers. The vocabulary suggests that the author of 1, 2, 3 John was the same individual, namely, John the apostle.

What do we know about John? He...

⇒ was the son of Zebedee and the brother of James; both left a lucrative fishing business to follow Jesus and become fishers of men (Mt 4:21-22)

⇒ belonged to the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, and was referred to as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (Jn 21:20)

⇒ was the last of the twelve apostles to die

If you trace the key events in John's life you'll discover that he followed Jesus for three years, then labored in Jerusalem during the early years of the church's existence (Acts 8:1; 15:2, 4; 16:4). After this he went to Ephesus in Asia around 65-70 A.D. where he served among the churches until 95 A.D. He was then exiled to an island called Patmos due to persecution by emperor Domitian. He returned to Ephesus in 97 A.D., and died there around 100 A.D.

Scholars feel that John wrote the epistle of 2 John from Ephesus between A.D. 90-95. It had been over sixty years since John walked the shores of Galilee with Jesus. He's now an old man, but he's not on the shelf. He's an 80+ year old man who's still serving Christ with a passion—which is why he wrote this letter.

Don't miss this. Followers of Christ don't retire from serving their Lord. Granted, for physical reasons the type of ministry may change (John was once an on-the-go evangelist and now he's ministering by letter writing) but the fact of ministry remains. We have been saved to serve Christ by serving His church. If you are not serving Christ by serving His people, you are robbing Christ, His people, and yourself.

According to John's introduction he had a very special relationship with the recipients of this letter (1-3): "The elder, To the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth [John said he loved this woman and her children, indicating he knew them well;

¹ Note the switch from second person singular "thy" in vv 4-5 to second person plural "ye" in vv 6, 8, 10. This could indicate that John has in mind a church rather than an individual mother.

² 2 John was written by John from Ephesus during the last decade of the first century, probably between A.D. 90-95.

verse 13 indicates he also knew the children of the woman's sister, who sent their greetings]—and not I only, but also all who know the truth— because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love."

Notice the very specific way John refers to Jesus, calling Him "the Father's Son." The real identity of Jesus was under attack by false teachers—that present danger was the reason John wrote this letter, as we'll soon see.

In verse 4 John shares his commendation—"It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us."

It has given me great joy, John says. When it comes to your children, what gives you joy? We would do well to ponder carefully John's source of joy.

A. Notice what he did not say. He did NOT commend this mother by saying...

1. *Your children are famous and wealthy.* If we're honest, parents, that's what often lures us when we think of our kids. It starts on the tee-ball field. It's not enough that our kids just play ball. They must be the next Sammy Sosa, and if the coach doesn't recognize their talent, we'll straighten him out! This lust for fame and wealth surfaces around the dinner table—and our kids pick up on it. Do your children hear you urging them to pursue careers where they can achieve the highest standard of living possible OR where they can best serve God?

Here's something else for which John did NOT commend this mother.

2. *Your children can provide you with security.* He doesn't say, "I'm so proud of you. Little Johnny has grown up to be a doctor and Sally is now the CEO of her own company. Good for you. They'll make sure you can enjoy your retirement years in ease and security." No, that's not what John says, and for that matter, that's not what brings joy.

B. Notice what does bring joy. Here it is. "It has given me great joy to find that..."

1. *Your children are walking in the truth.* The fact that John says "some of your children" may indicate that not all of her children were walking in the truth, or it may simply mean that he'd only met some of her children and that the ones he met were indeed walking in the truth.

But what does it mean to say someone's children are "walking in the truth?" Let's break in apart:

To "walk" refers to how a person *lives*. Walking is a present tense participle which communicates continual activity. This is what this mother's children were known for. They walked "in the truth."

What's "the truth"? Fundamentally, Jesus Himself is the truth as He proclaimed, "I am the way, *the truth*, and the life (John 14:6)." The truth is also what Jesus taught. "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:31-32)." So, *the truth* refers in essence to the person and word of Christ.

So put it all together and here's what you get. To say your children are walking in the truth is to say...

2. *Your children are living lives guided by the person and word of Christ.* When this woman's children made decisions about which job to pursue, or who to marry, or what kind of house to buy, or whatever, they didn't think of themselves. They thought of *the truth*. They made their decisions by thinking about what would please Christ and be

consistent with His Word. Truth wasn't merely something they heard and said they believed on Sunday. Truth was the realm in which they lived 24/7.

Let's be honest about something. The fact is, we operate by a Greek model of learning in the church, influenced by Plato. Even the very architecture of our churches adds to this. We herd people into pews sitting in rows (just like in a school setting). We open our heads, and allow the speaker to dump information from his page and mouth into our heads, and call that learning.

What's missing? If we have really learned truth, what will it affect? What *must* it affect? Our *walk* (which has to do with our actions, attitudes, and thoughts, our very *lives*).

And that's what thrilled John. It produced great joy in his heart to see a woman's children *walking in the truth*. It wasn't the amount of money they made or what the world thought of them. It's what they did with the truth.

Moms and dads, we need to commend our kids for the right things. For that matter, we need to commend parents who are passing on the right values to their children—like John did with this woman.

It wasn't a big thing but it made a big impact on me. Years ago when I was in junior school I attended a high school football game on a Friday night. I was mingling with a crowd of junior highers on the sidelines when I heard the band playing the Star Spangled Banner. I stopped, turned to the flag, and stood at attention. Several of the other guys around me kept playing, oblivious to anything but their fun. The song ended and life went on. No big deal.

On Sunday a woman came up to me at church and said, "I saw you at the football game Friday night. I appreciated what you did, stopping and showing respect during the national anthem." Those words of commendation didn't cost her a thing, but they made a difference. They helped burn into my soul the fact that it's always important to do the right thing, even if those around you aren't.

What does it take to produce children who walk in the truth? There's no cookie cutter formula. Someone could be a perfect parent and have their children go astray (God did; see Isaiah 1:2). But parents obviously have an influence. Here are some essentials. One is a commitment to the *truth*. If I want my kids to walk in the truth, I must make sure they are learning the truth! I must do all I can to introduce them to Christ and His Word. A second essential is our *example*. If you want your children to walk in the truth, they must see YOU walking in the truth. A third essential is *love*. Our kids need to know they are loved and what it means to love others. That's the very issue John addresses next...

So first of all, John gave this mother a commendation. Next...

II. John gave her a command (5-6).

Verse 5—"And 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." Here's the command...

A. We must love one another (5). John says that this isn't anything new. This is Christianity 101. Jesus said this the night before His crucifixion (John 13:34-35), "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Who are we to love? Everyone? Yes, but especially *one another*, the brethren. We have particular responsibility to demonstrate love to our fellow family members in the church.

Now what exactly is love? John clarifies in verse 6, “And 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.”

So we must love one another. And what does that mean? It means that...

B. We must walk in obedience to His commands (6). Let that sink in...

1. *Love isn't simply a feeling.* Though it may involve feelings and emotion, love is not fundamentally a feeling. It's a choice. It's a choice that has to do with our walk and Jesus' commands. Let me offer a definition...

2. *Love is choosing to obey Jesus in the way I treat you.* My motivation for loving you is vertical—my aim is to obey Jesus, to “walk in obedience to His commands.”

Let this sink in. Love is OBEDIENCE. Quite frankly, one of the reasons we don't love other people as we ought is because we let our feelings get in the way. Let me illustrate (all hypothetical):

⇒ Sally avoids Ann at church. In fact, it's so obvious that you ask her about it. “Well, she hurt my feelings six months ago.”

“How? What'd she do?” you ask.

“I was sick for two weeks and she didn't call me even once to see how I was feeling. If that's the way she's going to treat me then I don't want to be around her.”

Answer this. What's Sally doing? In her own words, she's letting her *feelings* keep her from obeying God's commands, for Hebrews 10:25 says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

⇒ Sam hears that the Jones family is going through a hard time. Due to a job loss the Jones' are unable to make house payments. On the other hand, this has been a bumper crop year for Sam at work. He's enjoying God's blessings as never before. But when he hears that the Sunday School class is asking for a love gift to help the Jones' he chooses not to participate. He chooses to use his money to buy an extra lens for his camera. He convinces himself, “Oh, I love the Jones family, but somebody else can help them.”

Answer this. Does Sam really love the Jones'? Listen to 1 John 3:16-18: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”

⇒ Amy is upset with her husband for “not meeting my needs.” She gives him the silent treatment. He senses that something's wrong, acknowledges his guilt, and asks her for forgiveness. She responds, “No. I can't. I don't feel like forgiving you.”

What's Amy's problem? She's living by her feelings rather than choosing to obey the Lord's commands. Jesus said in Matthew 5:38-42, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. *Give to the one who asks you*, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

Perhaps you're thinking, “But how can I do what I don't feel like doing?” The answer is, *you can't*. You can't keep God's commands on your own strength. You need

Christ. Christ gives the power. He enables us to do what He commands. And He expects us to do what He enables us to do.

“So are you saying we should always give to people who ask for help? Is that what love requires?” The answer is, no. And that’s the very issue John addressed next with this first century mother. After giving her a commendation and a command...

III. John gave her a caution (7-11).

We need some background to appreciate what John says next. As the first century church grew, it faced new issues...

For instance, suppose you were a Christian businessman who needed to travel from Ephesus to Rome. Where would you stay? In a motel? No, not only were the motels uncomfortable and unsafe, they were also immoral traps. And where would you stay if you were a traveling missionary or evangelist? In the homes of fellow Christians (Paul was entertained by Lydia in Philippi, Jason in Thessalonica, Gaius in Corinth, and Philip the evangelist in Caesarea).

But as time passes, good things are often abused. Such happened to Christian hospitality. Swindlers soon learned the Christians offered nice "bed and breakfasts" at no charge. All you had to do was what? Call yourself a Christian! Or better than that, become a preacher, travel around, and get lots of free meals.

Should Christians feed and house swindlers and false teachers who are motivated more by greed than creed?³ That's the key issue addressed in 2 John (and even in 3 John). Who do you welcome? Who do you refuse? And why?

John gave the “chosen lady” two words of caution...

A. Make sure you finish the job well (7-9). “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. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone 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.”

Note again the charge in verse 8, “Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for.” It’s a command. Don’t lose what you have. That’s exactly what some other folks in this lady’s church had just done. They had “gone out into the world” (7). They had “run ahead” of the teaching of Christ (9). Make sure that what happened to them does not happen to you and your children, dear lady.

Simply put, here are two things some were doing that we must not do.

1. Some abandon the person of Christ (7). In verse 7 John says there were *many* deceivers who had gone out into the world. They were deceivers for they portrayed themselves as one thing (a gospel preacher), but they weren’t. What gave them away? John says they “do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh.”

Since Satan can’t rewind the clock of history and undo what Jesus did, he does the next best (worst) thing. He seduces people to redefine the event:

“The Son of God didn’t really become a man,” he whispers. “God is too pure to contaminate Himself with a human body.” And so he hoodwinks people into believing either that Jesus was a man (but not God), or the Son of God (but not a man), and thereby guts God’s redemptive work of its power to save sinners.

³ Stott, 202

And please notice carefully. John doesn't tell us that these deceivers DENIED the incarnation, but that they merely didn't confess it. As Stott observes, "Perhaps they were subtle enough to counterfeit rather than contradict it."

For example, I read some material produced by one cult, and was amazed at how many true things I read (emphasis on family values, morality, the Bible, etc). Yet the truth was subtly corrupted by dangerous error.⁴

Don't miss this. The deceivers John had in mind would have called themselves "Christians." From their point of view they were Christian missionaries; from John's they were imposters.⁵

Don't let that happen to you, John cautioned this mother. Some abandon the person of Christ. And a second caution...

2. *Some abandon the teaching of Christ (9)*. John specifically says these folks did not continue in the "teaching of Christ." He also says that if a person doesn't continue in Christ's teaching he doesn't "have God."

John Stott is right, "Many today want God without Jesus Christ. They believe in God, they say, but see no necessity for Jesus. Or they regard other religions, whether ancient or modern, as alternate roads to God."⁶

No way, says The Elder. If you don't continue in the teaching of Christ, you don't have a relationship with God. "Watch out," he says to this mother and her children. "Don't let that happen to you." Or to put it positively, "Make sure you finish the job well."

Then he addresses the issue of hospitality, namely, how to treat a deceiver. If we're commanded to love people, does that mean we're to blindly open our arms to folks who are undermining the gospel? No. True love is not unthinking. True love is more than being big-hearted. The exercise of true love requires the use of our minds. In what way? Here's caution #2...

B. Make sure your love is guided by the truth (10-11). "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work."

Verse 10 is a critical, even somewhat controversial verse. John Stott rightly urges us to keep some things in mind:

First of all, John is referring to teachers of false doctrine, not merely to believers in it. What are the deceivers doing in verse 10? The key phrase is "comes to you." This is NOT a casual visitor, but an official teacher. This visitor not only believes false doctrine, but is "bringing" false doctrine to you (like a salesperson who brings his goods to sell).

Are we to cut ourselves off from people who believe false doctrine? No. Frankly, every non-Christian believes false doctrine!

A second factor to keep in mind—John may not have in mind private hospitality, but an official church welcome. Where were the deceivers to be prohibited in v 10? "Into your house"

Where did churches meet in John's day? In a house. The issue may be this. John says, "If some false teachers comes to your house church, don't give him the pulpit."

⁴ See statements taken from "Word and Deed: The Unification Movement" (see pp. 7-9)

⁵ Stott, 211

⁶ John Stott, pp. 213-4.

Thirdly, keep in mind that John is referring to teachers of false doctrine about the incarnation, not to every false teacher. This isn't a verse we can use to bar the doors to someone who uses a different version of the Bible than we do. John's not talking about personal differences of opinion here (eg--"If you don't believe in the Pre-trib rapture, I won't fellowship with you"). The issue is the Person and Work of Christ (His incarnation).

So what does the Bible say we are to do with deceivers? Verse 10—Don't welcome him (i.e. don't open your arms up to him).

And what is true of someone who gives ear and aid to false teachers? Verse 11—he is sharing in (the word is *koinoneo*, fellowshiping in) his wicked work.

Can we fellowship with everyone who says they believe in Christ? How about everyone who says they believe that Jesus died on a cross? I remind you that Muslims believe in Christ. So do many cults. In fact, the people John had in mind in verse 7 believed in Christ. But no fellowship was possible. Why not? They didn't believe in the Christ of the Bible (they denied that He had come in the flesh).

I see two practical lessons here.

1. *Sometimes love chooses NOT to help.* When I was in college I was in my dorm room one day when a young man knocked on the door... He told me his story about his ministry work and how he needed money to keep doing it. I felt sorry for him and gave him some money. Later I found out he was part of a cult.

That's the very issue John is warning us about here. Sometimes love chooses NOT to help. When? If my act of helping would actually hinder true gospel ministry or aid counterfeit gospel ministry.

When you're watching television and hear a tear-jerking story from a preacher and start to reach for your wallet, stop, and check the source. Is this tv preacher a minister of the true gospel or a false gospel? It's okay to use discretion. It's not unloving. It's what John urged this mother to do. Sometimes love chooses NOT to help.

2. *At all times love chooses to please Christ.* There's nothing more important. The One who left heaven to come to earth and die for our sins deserves our all. The One who conquered the grave deserves our allegiance. The One who made such a great sacrifice for us deserves that we be willing to make sacrifices to meet needs in the lives of His people.

Suddenly, at that point in the letter, John stopped. He acknowledged he had much more to say (verse 12), but that he would wait until he could share it in person. He said he hoped to come and visit face to face. His intent? "That our joy may be complete." After passing on greetings from the children of the "chosen sister" in verse 13, he lay down his pen—the commendation, the command, and the caution were finished.

Before we leave this letter to a mother and her children, let's make it personal...

Make It Personal: How is it in your family?

Let's ponder three questions John addressed with the chosen lady...

1. *Are you committed to loving each other?*
2. *Are you committed to truth?*
3. *Are you committed to Christ?*