

Loving in the Truth and Holding the Truth in Love

The books of 2 John and 3 John should really be read together. They deal with two crucial issues – love and truth. 2 John deals with people who are all love, but have no truth and 3 John deals with people who are all truth but have no love. John brings balance by showing you need love and truth together.

First, let us deal with 2 John, a book that deals with the extreme of loving with no truth. Some churches today suffer from this extreme. The emphasis is on friendliness, affection, happy times, being good to each other. The key word is ‘tolerance’ – all kindness and warmth. But sound doctrine, taking a stand against sin, exposing false doctrine and false teachers, separating from apostasy – these things are seldom heard. All love, no truth.

John addresses a lady, or a church, and deals with such a problem. First, he commends her. She is in the truth, so are her children. She’s not in false doctrine. But then he commands her to love. But what is love? *"And this is love: that we walk according to his commandments. This is the commandment, as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it"* (**2 John 1:6**).

What is John saying to her? Love in the truth. He explains the necessity of loving in the truth by giving a case study in versus 7-11. You see, love without truth is like a train without railroad tracks. With nothing to guide it, it will get out of control. Truth bolts love down, and gives it purpose, direction, and control. Love apart from truth is no longer love. This is because love is based on a relationship with a person.

To truly love a person, you must have truth about the person, otherwise your love is misguided, and you are loving something untrue about the person, or even another person. Relationships by their very nature have do’s and don’ts. You do some things which please the person you love, and you avoid the others. That’s love – it’s the laws of the relationship.

That’s why John defines love this way in verse 6. Keeping God’s commandments is the essence of loving Him. Truth about the person should guide the love. Imagine a banquet held in your honour. A lot of people are involved in planning this banquet. While planning, someone wants to put something on the menu that you are allergic to. Those who know you object and say, ‘No, this is for so-and-so. They are allergic to that! We can’t have that as one of the dishes.’

Say the other organisers reply, ‘Stop being so critical and divisive. You are being judgmental of our decisions. This is the way we want to honour him, so just have grace!’ Well, they are really warped in their thinking. It’s not about being critical, judgmental or divisive, it’s about what you like or want and don’t like or want, and what they’re planning – you don’t want! It’s that simple!

Those who say, ‘Look, let’s all just come together and love’ are like the people at the banquet preparing things for God that He hates, and getting upset when those who know Him object! They have missed the point of 2 John: we love in the truth – for the truth’s sake! The truth guides our love. We know things about God from His Word, and they are non-negotiable. When someone says, ‘Let’s do it this way’ and it’s something that God is allergic to, then our love for God says, ‘No! That’s wrong! That music, that worship, that behaviour, that teaching – is distasteful to Him!’

Notice John uses the word ‘for’ to enter into verse 7: *"For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist"* (**2 John 1:7**). John is explaining how loving in the truth is tested. If an apostate comes to your church door, is love giving them hospitality? No, John shows in this case, to love in the truth is to give them no hospitality at all.

John is explaining the crucial need to love in the truth. To say, 'Live and let live!' would not be loving. The lady or church John was addressing in this letter was strong on love, but was perhaps a little weak on loving in the truth. John shows an example of how loving in the truth works in real life. If someone from a cult or false religion came to you, the world's love would say, 'Hi! Look, I can't chat now, but let me take a pamphlet! Thanks, bye and God bless!'

But John says, that to actually love this apostate would be to show them that they are so. To so separate from their false doctrine that they know you are not involved in it at all, and completely condemn it as falsehood. It doesn't mean we slam the door in the faces of cults, it means we don't ever give them the impression that we can accept their doctrine. We are supposed to love them and reach them:

And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.

Jude 22-23

Real love is guided by the truth, it loves in the parameters of the truth. What is the truth?

John 17:17 says, *"Thy word is truth."* Truth is God's commandments. If someone is outside the truth, we do not hate them, but we love them differently. God uses different strategies to reach different types of hearts.

God uses law for the proud, and grace for the humble. Scripture clearly teaches that there are degrees of separation. Those godliest and closest to you are your inner circle, other believers are in the next, worldly or rebellious believers are in the next, unbelievers in the next, apostates in the last. Separation is not degrees of hate – it is degrees of fellowship, communion and intimate love.

Love apart from truth is truly a runaway train. Why? See, when love no longer has objective truth to guide it, it all becomes subjective. What I like, what I feel, what I want. It goes from being Word-based to experience-based. 'Anything goes in our church services, because it's all about love.' Love becomes whatever pleases me, or you, whatever I enjoy. In short, it becomes emotionalism.

That's why so many believers go to church services where the 'love of God' is where they close their eyes and deeply concentrate until that feeling of joy floods over them – then the love of God has arrived. That is sentimentalism. It is emotionalism, because the same person can go from there, live in opposition to God's commands, return the next week and have the same feeling.

That's as ridiculous as a man saying, 'My wife and I have such an amazing relationship! She makes my heart soar!' Then, he goes and has numerous affairs, and continues to speak enthusiastically about his wife. You'll think the man is twisted. The very nature of his relationship is being violated by his behaviour, but he thinks his self-induced emotionalism is real love! It's the furthest thing from it. He is in fact hating his wife with his behaviour, no matter what his feelings tell him.

So it is with the believer who disobeys God and says, 'My love for God is so amazing!' It's crazy! Again, that's why **2 John 1:6** says, *"And this is love, that we walk after His commandments."* And let's add, emotionalism will pretty quickly lead into sensuality. Remember the incident in Exodus 32. Moses was taking long coming down from the mountain. What was supposed to be a time of consecration turned into a drunken sex orgy, as Aaron made them the golden calf and people worshipped it.

The Israelites ate and drank and got involved in immorality – but worse – they continued to bring peace offerings and observe religious things at the time. Aaron even said, "It is a day unto the Lord." Why? They had no law to guide their love – so it became subjective,

emotional and then sensual. That's like many churches today. The services are filled with rampant sensuality, the people are filled up with phony emotionalism, and the things they are doing are offensive to God, but they say, 'It's unto the Lord! We do it because we love Him!'

No, they may think they do, but they don't. They are not loving in the truth. To really love Him is to study the truth about Him so you can love Him as He wants it. Loving what is false is to compromise with sin. That is no love at all. We love in the truth. We don't love the facts – we love people, but truth guides how we express our love. Apostates one way, believers another.

Love without truth is no longer love. The lady or church in 2 John was leaning towards all love and no truth, and John says, 'Love in the truth.'

But as we said, you can't have the one without the other. So the other extreme is all truth and no love. There are some churches that are like this too. All doctrine, truth, sound teaching. They know who's a false teacher and who isn't. They are clued up on the cults. Straight as an arrow in theology. But the people seem hard, cold, even snobbish. Suspiciousness of all, even each other.

In such churches, legalism makes the atmosphere heavy, oppressive and unfriendly. To speak of love and tolerance makes you a sissy, or worse, a heretic. Everyone is sound, but everyone is also lonely. All truth – no love. This is why John wrote 3 John. To the last church in 2 John he said, 'Love in the truth' now he says, 'Hold the truth in love.' Once again, he first commends:

For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

3 John 1:3-4

He needs to do this, because the man John is writing to, Gaius, is in a confusing situation. See, Gaius is doing something good – he is showing hospitality to traveling preachers. He is loving in the truth and his life he is also clearly holding the truth in love. The confusion for Gaius is that he seems to be under a very ungodly pastor named Diotrophes.

Diotrophes has truth, but no love. He is slandering people, casting them out the church, resisting John – and generally displaying a spirit quite contrary to that of brotherly love. Notice that when John describes Diotrophes, he does not say, 'Diotrophes is preaching this particular false doctrine.' No, John condemns his behaviour, not his beliefs.

I think Diotrophes hid behind the appearance of sound doctrine. Diotrophes used his orthodox doctrinal position (without which he could never have been a pastor in a church with Gaius in it) to abuse and destroy people. He exalted himself. Who knows, maybe he even thought he was serving God when doing it. No matter, his behaviour shows he might have had true doctrine, but his life was pathetic.

So Gaius is in a confusing place. He is receiving the brethren, while his pastor seems to be not only refusing to do that, but disciplining those who tried to! His spirit is malicious, un-Christlike and cruel. Gaius must be asking, 'But Pastor Diotrophes is in the truth! I wouldn't be here, if he wasn't. But is this right?' So John commands Gaius in to hold the truth in love and not to imitate Diotrophes:

Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; which have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well: because that for his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth.

3 John 1:5-8

Essentially, he says, 'Yes, Gaius, you've got the balance right. You're being faithful, keep at it.' Once again, to illustrate, he uses a case study: Diotrophes and Demetrius. Diotrophes' spirit is ungodly, his attitude is all wrong. He claims to be in the truth, but in fact he's lost it. He speaks nonsense from his pulpit, and is a divider of the brethren. On the other hand, Demetrius' life is plain, pure and simple. It's not confusing to Gaius – it's just good.

Notice the command in **3 John 1:11**: "*Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God.*" Imitate what is good. The fruit of a life shows what's in the heart – don't imitate someone whose life shows their heart is malicious, cruel and evil.

So John says in 2 John you can't have love without truth, and in 3 John he says, you can't have truth without love either! Just as love without truth becomes warped into something that is not love – so truth without love becomes something it isn't. It becomes warped into the commandments of men.

See, so many good movements begin as a reaction to sin and false teaching. But the danger is to be all truth, and to lose love: "*because iniquity will abound, the love of many shall wax cold*" (**Matthew 24:12**). God gave us the example of the Pharisees. Do you know how they began? As a reaction to false teaching in their day. They rejected the Hellenizing influences – the spiritualising of scripture – and fought for a literal, grammatical interpretation. That was a noble thing to do.

But by the time Jesus arrives on the scene, the Pharisees had become warped. They tithe mint seeds, but neglect mercy, judgment and faith. They are scholars supreme, but inwardly spiritually bankrupt. They are 'doctors of doctrine', but they have actually lost the spirit of the law. How did they get so far off base? Like the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2, at some point they lost their first love – their love for God – and that for their neighbour went out of it.

Then, their obedience was for the sake of doctrine, of the law, the traditions – not for the sake of truth – which includes love. Like the church at Ephesus who knew exactly who a false teacher was and who wasn't, Jesus pointed out a fatal flaw – love had gone out of it. There was truth, but love was fading, and truth was in danger, because truth without love always becomes legalism.

Legalism is anything you do in the name of God, but for yourself, and by your own power. Legalism has a form of godliness, but it denies the power thereof. It eventually gets it all mixed up – its strains out gnats and swallows camels. It majors on the minors and minors on the majors. You can see when a body is degenerating into legalism, when actual practical love is disappearing among the brethren, and we console ourselves, 'But we have the truth.' No, if love is disappearing, then so is the truth from your assembly.

Truth is ignited, lives and breathes on the communion between personalities. Truth does not exist in a vacuum. Apart from the relationship, truth becomes mere facts. Jesus said, "*I am the truth*" (**John 14:6**). Truth – reality – is a Person. You can't divorce it from Him! That's like trying to explain love apart from God.

Let's go back to our banquet example. This time, a banquet is prepared for you, but everything is made exactly to your liking, down to the finest detail. It is completely accurate in its reflection of what you like. But on your arrival, everyone is solemn, sombre and unfriendly. Everyone eats in silence. There is no celebration, no laughing, no enjoyment, no listening, learning, enjoying. There is no life!

That's why Jesus said to the Pharisees, "*But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*" (**Matthew 9:13**). He meant, 'I want your heart, not your religious ritual. I want a relationship.'

Many an orthodox Christian hides behind their perfect doctrine to conceal a life filled with secret sin, and a cold relationship with God. They may say, 'I've got the truth!' but it's useless in your hands if you are not applying it. Facts about God must travel the crucial 30 cm from the head to the heart!

My little children, let us not love in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

1 John 3:18

If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"

1 John 4:20

The truth guides, directs and controls your love. But it doesn't create your love! Like a railroad – it might be perfectly laid down – but you still need the train. Truth without love is flawless direction – but you're not going anywhere! Have truth to guide and discipline your love, but then love! How? **Romans 5:5**: *"and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."*

God the Spirit gives you the power, and you obey. Love is an act of the will – choosing to sacrifice for another. Ultimately, like with Diotrophes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The fruit of his lips, the fruit of his life, showed he was neither loving in the truth, nor holding the truth in love. His autocratic behaviour, his shunning of other believers, his angry and slanderous ways, were evil.

John says, don't follow that, don't imitate that, Gaius. Don't become like him, don't be all truth and no love, because then you lose the truth itself. The message changes. The best men and women I have known loved in the truth, and held the truth in love. Their love was guided, restricted, to the truth, while at the same time, they stood for the truth with ever growing love for God and their neighbour – and it showed.

When you show this love, you are co-labourers in the truth. Real love helps and aids the truth – it can't be divorced from the truth. But truth lacking love is a wolf in sheep's clothing! And as if to confirm it, John says, *"He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God"* (**3 John 1:11**). That is, he that does evil is evil. It doesn't matter how orthodox his theology is, how perfect his doctrine – he that does evil is evil.

This message in 3 John contrasts with that in 2 John. Here Gaius was walking in truth, but perhaps being influenced by Diotrophes to have truth with no love. How many churches and believers end up like Diotrophes – becoming hard, cold and cruel inside, and claiming they 'just stand for the truth'? They become spiritual bullies – clobbering everyone, to see who is weak and insincere. You don't have to use the truth like a weapon to scare away the insincere. That's not our place.

And when He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him: for they know His voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers.

John 10: 4-5

True sheep will not continue in lies. Goats, on the other hand, can't hear the difference and will continue in falsehood. More than that, if you just keep preaching the truth, goats will react one of two ways: they'll get saved and become sheep, or they'll leave. Keep preaching truth – and you'll preach the goats out! But woe to the man who scatters the sheep! Woe to the Diotrophes who will not receive brethren and hides behind 'truth'.

Ezekiel 34 has sharp words for shepherds who scatter the sheep, who don't find the lost, who don't bind up the injured, but rule with force and cruelty. Woe to you who claim to represent Christ, but your attitude is that of an overlord, not a foot-washing servant. The

thing is, truth may offend the proud, it may break the heart – but it will, by its nature, set people free.

John said in **1 John 4:18**, “*Perfect love casteth out fear.*” In a setup where there is truth held in love, there is no fear of man. A congregant may not like the truth – they may get offended – but in a believer there should be no ungodly fear of man – only a deep reverence for God. You know that your truth is lacking in love when people are living in bondage, in fear of man, scared. Some preachers think that people getting offended at the truth gives them a licence to be hostile, cruel, or malicious like Diotrophes.

Listen, people got offended when God the Son spoke to them. But Jesus didn’t say, “Well, I’m not dying for you lot!” He continued to hold the truth in love. Sometimes that meant a scathing rebuke of the Pharisees. Sometimes it meant quiet talks with his disciples. Sometimes it meant a simple “*Go and sin no more*” to the woman caught in adultery. But Jesus called the Pharisees a brood of vipers! Yes, He spoke the truth in love. He knew who needed to hear what, when. To others, He said, “Come unto me.” Always, He held the truth with love.

If people are going to be offended, let them be offended by *what* you said, not how you said it. Let them be offended by your message, not offended by you the messenger. Diotrophes had become so proud, that he thought teaching truth was licence to act maliciously, to slander others from the pulpit, to scatter the sheep. But don’t think for a moment that teaching truth gives you the right to be malicious. Jesus had some of his strongest words for people who cause young believers to stumble.

And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea.

Mark 9:42

It’s one thing if your message is simply the offense of the cross. It’s another if you, by your hatred and un-Christlikeness, are the offense. If you can’t be bothered to find the difference, then don’t teach.

You see, ambassadors make sure they represent their president accurately in every way. They don’t just report correct facts about the land, their very manner must be an advertisement for their president. Standing for the truth will involve conflict. It will involve a lot of people getting offended and leaving and slandering you. But that never allows you to become mean or hard-hearted. Hear Paul’s words:

That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.

Ephesians 1:14-15

The way you say something affects the meaning. Speak it in love. Though you are opposing false doctrine, though you are a voice in the wilderness, speak the truth in love. Your message may be hard, direct and extremely convicting, but if it lacks love – for God, and the people you are giving it to – it is a sounding cymbal, a clanging gong – useless.

Don’t define love on your own terms. Use **1 Corinthians 13** to judge if you are holding the truth in love. Apply this passage to spiritual gifts. Use it regarding your teaching. When you teach, are you patient? Are you kind? Do you envy other teachers? Do you use your teaching to brag? Do you get proud when people congratulate your teaching? Are you rude or discourteous? Are you unselfish?

Ask yourself honestly, are you meek? Do you think pure thoughts? Do you believe the best about your people? Do you take joy in truth, rather than in the fall of others? Do you endure, remain optimistic, hope for the best? That's speaking the truth in love. If you're not doing this, then Paul says you're just making a noise. You are not a useful, pure messenger of God. Because God says, 'Don't just say the right things, say it My way!'

Some say you must have two things to minister effectively: a thick skin, and a soft heart. Too many of us get it the other way around – we get a thin skin, and a hard heart. Jesus Himself taught us that when He sent His disciples out: *"Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves"* (**Matthew 10:16**).

He said, 'You are my sheep going among cruel and vicious people. Don't become like them. Be shrewd, smart and wise in your approach, but never lose the humble, gentle dependent heart of a dove.' Don't lose your purity, your humility – stay gentle as you proclaim the truth. Hold the truth in love, like Gaius. His love was seen by his sacrificial hospitality. He held truth, but it never turned him into a selfish, cold man, brooding about how no one believes the truth like him. The opposite – it opened him up! He had more joy, not less!

2 John 2 tells us that the truth will be with us forever. And **1 Corinthians 13** says, charity never faileth. Truth and love are twins forever centred on the person of Jesus Christ. If you really love Him, you'll want to know the truth about Him. You will therefore love in the truth. What offends Him, what is anti-Christ, you will not love, but truth will guide and direct your love.

Likewise, since Jesus said, *"I am the truth,"* your knowledge of the truth will never be static, dead, or theoretical. It resides in Him, and you can never hold truth about Him in a way which does not represent Him. You hold the truth in a love that comes from Him, but love nonetheless.

So let us not become emotional, sensual worshippers of ourselves by losing truth. Let us not become cold, legalistic Pharisees by losing love. Let us love in the truth, and hold the truth in love.