

The Nature of Christian Love

2 John 1:1-6 *THE ELDER, To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth,* ² *because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever:* ³ *Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.* ⁴ *I rejoiced greatly that I have found some of your children walking in truth, as we received commandment from the Father.* ⁵ *And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another.* ⁶ *This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it.*

Picture yourself living in another country and learning a foreign language. As you learn this language you learn words that are needful for everyday speech like go, come, hot, cold, slow, fast. And you think you know the word for 'hot', and keep using it. You ask for a hot meal, and you remark one day that the weather is hot, and you ask which tap brings out the hot water. After some confusing encounters, you come to realise that you were actually using the word for 'cold' in that language, when you thought you were saying 'hot'. You can imagine how much confusion that would cause.

Now you can see how that could happen if you were learning a new language. You say the wrong word, or the opposite word, because you are unfamiliar with the language. But what if a situation like that occurred in your home language? You kept using a word, thinking you meant one thing, when in fact, it meant something completely different. What if that word was a critically important word, like "love"? What if what came into your mind when you heard the word 'love' was something completely different from what the Creator and Author of love means by that term? Would that have rather large consequences in your life? Would that affect your ability to fulfil the greatest commandment of all – to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength? Would that affect your ability to fulfil the second commandment, to love your neighbour as yourself?

You can be sure it would. And I don't think it will surprise you when I say that what most people in the world consider to be love, looks very little like what God considers to be love. If we watch the popular films today, read the popular novels, or listen to the talk shows, we get a fairly consistent picture of how people view love today.

Love is first loving yourself. Love is being obligated to me. I must love myself, so that I can love others. Because I am at the centre, I initiate and dissolve relationships at will. If they help me be fulfilled, I have them; if they don't, I end them. I know you love me when you just let me be me. I know that you love me when you let me express myself without judging me. Love is setting me absolutely free to be and do all that I want to be. All forms of authority are hostile to love, because authority seeks to control, but love seeks to set free. Institutions like church or marriage are hostile to love, because they are not spontaneous, and from the heart, but are bureaucratic and controlling.

If you are being fed this view of love, day after day, in conversations, in movies, in ads, in talk shows, in series, in novels, do you think it is going to affect your understanding of loving God, and loving His people? It certainly will. It rearranges all our expectations. It affects worship, because if love is all about self-expression and self-realisation, then what kind of music and songs will I want – the songs which are all about my self-expression. So I connect a lot more deeply with "I could sing of your love forever" than with "When I survey the wondrous cross"

It affects fellowship, If love is all about self-expression, then we need to set the church up to find all kinds of interest groups for people to find others who share their life experiences, rather than finding older people to learn from and younger people to disciple.

It affects discipleship, because if a church is loving when it makes me feel relaxed and comfortable and doesn't judge me, then we need to avoid confronting one another with Scripture and with God's demands.

At the heart of the worship wars is a very different view of what it means to love God. At the heart of people getting disgruntled and saying, 'That church isn't loving' is a very different view of what love is.

What we find when we study the Word of God is that God's love, and right love for God and others, is not what we expect. It is certainly not what the world teaches us, but more than that, it is not always what we expect or want. There are things about God's love that are very attractive to us. There are things about God's love that are very offensive and repulsive to us in our fallen natures.

If we're going to avoid setting up an idol in our own minds, and calling it love, we need to know what God's love truly is, and what it means to reflect that kind of love back to God and others. We need to be stripped of our false views of love, and given God's view of love.

The book of 2 John was written to do just that. Christianity was known for its remarkable love of one another. Even the pagans remarked 'Behold how they love one another.' But towards the end of the first century, certain very serious heresies began appearing, claiming to be original Christianity. They claimed that Christ had never actually possessed a true human nature, or they claimed that Christ left Jesus before the cross. These teachings were denying the gospel itself, while claiming to be the gospel! They were rat poison coated with chocolate.

Well, here was a problem. On the one hand, you had people who were known for their love, for their sacrifice, and for their hospitality. On the other hand, you had these false teachers travelling around, spreading their false gospel. So what do these loving Christians do with these false teachers? It seems as though some of them were buying into a sentimental kind of love. Some of them were giving help and hospitality to these false teachers, in the name of Christian love. Their view of love was becoming weak, sentimental, flabby. It was losing focus, sharpness, and direction. This book was written to fix that. It was written to deliver the Christians that read it, from ending up with a warped or even idolatrous love. It was written to show what Christian love is, and what it isn't.

We're almost certain that the same John who wrote 1 John and the Gospel of John wrote this epistle, even though he refers to himself as John the elder. It's addressed to the elect lady and her children. This may refer to a Christian lady, perhaps a widow with children, who perhaps hosted a house-church in her home. It may refer to a church, because occasionally the writers spoke of whole churches as a woman or a bride. For example, Peter writes: ¹³ *She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son. (1 Peter 5:13)*

We see that this epistle is about love in verse 5.

2 John 1:5 And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another.

John says, 'This is my plea; this is why I am writing to you that age-old commandment: love one

another.' John had repeated that command over and over in 1 John. But here in 2 John he takes a bit of time to explain what this love is and what it isn't.

John does two things regarding Christian love in this epistle. Today we want to look at the first thing he does, which is explaining the real nature of Christian love, in the first six verses. We're going to see John underline two characteristics of real Christian love: Real Christian love is limited by truth, and real Christian love is expressed through submission.

I. Real Christian Love is Limited By Truth

At first that might sound hard on your ears. How can we limit love? Isn't love supposed to be an ocean of emotion? Isn't love unbounded, the freest thing in the world? Isn't that the first principle of love, that everyone else might try to stop us, doubt us, hold us down, but our love is what sets us free?

Well, John is very clear that his own love is limited by truth.

2 John 1:1 THE ELDER, To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth,

John does not love this sister in Christ, or this church in any other way except *in the truth*. The truth is the wire that conducts his love. The truth is the pipe that carries his love. The truth is the railway tracks that carry his love. His love is not a free broadcast to whomever and whatever. His love is not a sprinkler to all things green and beautiful. His love is bolted down and guided and limited by truth.

Not only John, but others love the elect lady and her children. Who else loves her: "All those who have known the truth". The truth is the reason and the guide for their love for her.

In verse 2, John explains not only how he loves, but why.

2 John 1:2 because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever:

The truth is what has caused, and what sustains John's love. John wants to make it clear that truth is what is in us believers, and truth is what will be with us forever. Even if feelings come and go, truth remains. Truth is what has caused this love and what sustains it.

And if the point were not already made, John tells you that God's blessing comes to believers in truth and love, and that his joy came from hearing that his beloved children walked in truth

2 John 1:3 Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.

2 John 1:4 I rejoiced greatly that I have found some of your children walking in truth, as we received commandment from the Father.

So here we have John exhorting the elect lady and her children to love, but he is making it very clear that Christian love is love limited by truth. You love in the truth; you love because of the truth.

Why is that so?

Love is based upon the true qualities and nature of the thing or person we love. To love the sea, I

have to see the sea, and preferably, experience the sea. To love a meal, I need to taste it. In other words, I need truth about the sea, and truth about the meal to love it properly. To love God, and to love man, and to properly understand God's love for you, you need truth. You need truth about who God is? Is God an Impersonal Higher Being? Is God a Cosmic Therapist? Is God a Super Father Christmas? Is God a Selfish Zeus? Is God a Pal? Is God a Boyfriend? Is God a King? You need truth about God to love Him properly. Just like you need truth about man. Is man a wounded traveller? Is he a sick patient? Is he a dying rebel? Is he lost? Is he in God's image?

Christian love is limited by the truth. Now the intensity and magnitude of your love will surely grow. But it will never burst the banks of truth. Your love can and must grow. But it will never outgrow or overgrow truth about the one or ones you love. The moment it does that, it is no longer Christian love.

Someone has said that love and truth are like a train and its tracks. Love is like the train, and truth is like the tracks. If all you have is truth, then you have a track with nothing on it. But if all you have is love, then you have a train that is going to go dangerously rushing all over the place, and probably cause destruction. You need both: a train and tracks. Love for God and man, limited by truth about God and man. If you have a lot of truth with no love, you will be a cold, sterile Christian, your head bursting with facts, but your heart like the Antarctic in June. If you don't have truth about who God is and what He is like, who and what man is, your love is going to go all over the show. You will love God inappropriately. You will import all these ideas of the world - that love is about my freedom, my individualism, my autonomy, my self-expression into your relationship with God and with his people in the church. And you will make a shipwreck, or to use our current illustration, a train-wreck of your life.

John is not doing these things by accident. He writes this way because he wants the elect lady to ground her love in truth. Here are all these false teachers, warping the gospel, leading people into idolatry. He wants her to know that there is no contradiction between love and truth. He wants her to study the Scriptures, know the gospel, know who God really is, and discern truth from error, right from wrong, good from bad, beautiful from ugly, useful from worthless. If she knows truth, then her love will be well directed.

So with you Christian, God wants you to know that love for Him and for man is grown by limiting and guiding that love to God's revelation. What God has revealed is the canal in which affections for God flow. It is not unloving to discern if something is pleasing to God or not. It is not unloving to judge if something is beautiful and fitting to offer to God. It is not unloving to test if something really does agree with God's revelation of Himself.

Once you are in God's Word, you will see that there is a kind of love that is appropriate for God, and a kind that is not. So, if someone wants to sing a song that expresses the wrong kind of love for God, and they become upset if we do not let them express themselves, is that unloving of us? No, that's loving God in the truth. If someone is uncomfortable with accountability and with the demands God makes on their life, is it unloving of us to confront them with those demands? No, that's loving them in the truth.

It's offensive to our sinful natures that God will not be loved by us any way we please. That's what offended Cain. He wanted to love God his way. He wanted God to accept his self-expression. When we find out that loving God is not about us, it's about Him, it offends. You mean I could be wrong in how I have been loving God? Are you saying God won't respect my offering, when I gave it with all that sincerity? Are you trying to say God won't know my heart of love? Yes, says God. It doesn't

matter what you think is in your heart. What matters is truth about who God actually is, what He actually is like, what he actually deserves, and how you actually should love Him. Christian love is limited by truth. John says something else about Christian love which is highly unpopular today.

II. Real Christian Love is Expressed through Submission.

2 John 1:6 This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it.

John says this is love, that you should walk according to His commandments. Love for God is expressed in a submissive relationship. John wants the elect lady to know that just like love is limited by truth about God, love for God is limited by the stated will of God. She cannot claim to love God if she loves what

How do you think God felt about false teachers who were distorting the gospel and preventing people from hearing the true gospel? Do you think God would want to give that message a hearty supper, a warm bed and a good breakfast in the morning? No. But the elect lady must be reminded that to love God is to submit to God's will. To love God is not to do your own will in His name, or do whatever you think is best, but to submit to God.

John 14:15 ¶ "If you love Me, keep My commandments.

John 14:21 "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him."

John 15:10 "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

1 John 5:3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.

Christian love is not pleasing myself by thinking, I'm pleasing others. Christian love is not freeing myself to be and do what I want to others. Christian love is submitting my thoughts, rights and expectations to the will of another, and living to please Him. Christian love is first limited to truth – truth about God and truth about His will. Once I know the truth about God and what He wants, I submit to it. I obey it. I love Him as He is; I do as He commanded.

Now this is very counter-culture. We have all been raised to be suspicious of authority. In fact, we tend to see love and commandments as opposites. Love is the wind under my hang-glider; commandments are a 500 kilogramme iron anchor tied to my feet. Love frees me; commandments bind me. Love unleashes my potential and creativity; commandments stifle me and squeeze me into a mould.

But this is just the kind of thinking that 2 John wants to overturn. In Scripture, God is a King. He is a loving King. In fact, His loving rule over the universe is exactly what creates and sustain life. When God created Adam, He essentially told him to rule over the world. He delegated authority to Adam, and said, make the world submit to you, and in so doing, make it better. In God's plan, loving authority brings beauty and order and life out of chaos and darkness.

2 Samuel 23:3-4 The God of Israel said, The Rock of Israel spoke to me: 'He who rules over men must be just, Ruling in the fear of God. ⁴ And he shall be like the light of the morning when the sun rises, A morning without clouds, Like the tender grass springing out of the earth, By clear shining after rain.'

Who was the first one to suggest that in submitting to God, man was actually being robbed of real life? Who suggested that submitting to God was weighing man down, holding him back from his true potential, clipping his wings, keeping him pecking on the ground, when he could be soaring like an eagle?

Satan did, to our first parents. So when that thought seems to so resonate with you, you know why. It resonated with them, and you have their natures. Obeying God, submitting to Him, following His written Word, submitting to God-ordained authorities in this life, this isn't love? This is legalism. It's control. It's a waste of my happiness potential. It's spending my best years on a ball and chain.

That's satanic talk. The so-called love that Satan promotes is a free-fall to death. It feels exhilarating to jump out the plane with no parachute, but the trip must come to an end in a world where the laws of gravity still work. Following your own heart may feel good and right, but it can only come to an end in a universe created by God.

Imagine yourself as a waiter at a rather posh restaurant. You take the order from a table of a distinguished -looking man and his wife. But on the way to the kitchen, you decide that theirs was a poor choice. You know a much better dish. You change their order, without consulting them, and give it to the chef. Once it's ready, you proudly bring it to their table. What will their reaction be? They will say, "We didn't order this!"

And if you say, "Yes, but I thought you'd prefer this."

They could quite rightly get upset and say, "What give you the right? We're the paying customers. We make the order. You take this to the chef."

Now what if you look hurt and say to them, "That does not very love". I was only trying to please you. I was only sincerely doing what I thought was best."

The polite answer would be, "Who cares what you thought or were trying to do? You're a waiter. You take orders, not make them."

The nature of Christian love is based upon our true position before God. God is a King. Loving a King is not the same as loving your friend or your child. Loving a King means His nature is one who commands. Real Christian love is expressed in submitting to the commands of God revealed in Scripture.

To love God is to take orders from Him. What comes out is better than anything you could have planned. To work within his limits is true freedom. To love what God loves; to make pleasing Him your pleasure, is to really love and be loved.

So when God's Word comes to you and says, 'Stop doing this and start doing that' to be pleasing to God, and everything in you says, 'This isn't love' - God's Word says, no it is. It's true, Christian love.

When a church sees one of its own refusing to repent, and it says corporately, you cannot be considered part of us anymore, because you refuse to obey God's commandments, is that unloving. No, its real Christian love that understands love for God is expressed in submitting to God.

When a church makes it plain what it means to obey God in the culture we are living in now, is that legalism and Pharisaic? No, that's real Christian love, which knows that love for God is made up of loving what He loves.

No area of our lives is more vulnerable to idolatry than our view of love. We are so susceptible to re-make love in our own image, according to our own comforts, at our own leisure. But the great danger is this: while we may be very pleased with ourselves, and very assured by how loving we feel, we may end up with a golden calf that we are calling Jehovah Jesus. We avoid that by limiting our love to truth. Truth about God, man, the world and ourselves guides, directs, focuses and limits the meaning and expressions of our love.

Second, we love within the orders God has given us. To love God, and then by extension to love others properly, we submit, giving up on our own ideas, and submitting to Him.

You're using this word 'love'. Do you mean what God means, or do you mean what the world means?