

Truth, Love, and Jesus Christ in the Flesh

2<sup>nd</sup> John

Turn to 2<sup>nd</sup> John please. 3<sup>rd</sup> John was a letter to Gaius, a man in the church John wrote to. The problem in that church was a different man, a man who loved to be first, and who did his best to keep old John and his messengers away from the church.

One bright spot in that church was Gaius himself. Gaius was loyal to true story about Jesus, and he lived it out. In particular he was unfailingly kind and helpful to travelling Christians, like the messengers who came from John, even messengers Gaius had not seen before.

By the time of 2<sup>nd</sup> John, it seems the problem has gotten worse, because John divides the church into two groups, those who walk in the truth, and those who don't. Let's begin.

The Lady and her Children vv1, 13

The letter begins: *The elder* (that's old John), *To the lady chosen by God and to her children.*

The letter ends, *The children of your sister, who is chosen by God, send their greetings.*

Who is the lady chosen by God, who are her children, who is her sister, and her sister's children? Answer: This is much like Revelation. The lady, the woman, is a picture for the people of God. Jesus spoke about the bride and the groom, he being the groom, and his people being the bride.

But that is also a common OT image. Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Hosea write powerfully about Israel being God's unfaithful wife. The people of God being in some ways like God's wife is a common OT image. The woman is the people of God.

So in Revelation, the glorious pregnant woman who has a crown of twelve stars is the people of God. Who are her children? Revelation 12 says, "those who obey God and confess Jesus." So the woman is whole people of God, and individual believers are her children.

Remember this is the same John writing 1, 2, 3 John as the John who wrote Revelation. Here it is a bit different: "the lady chosen by God" is the particular church to which John writes, and her children are the individual believers in that church. At the end of the letter, the lady's sister is the church where John is, and the individual believers in that church are the sister's children.

It's a warm image of church, isn't it. Our own church, KCC, taken as one whole, is a woman, a lady, chosen by God to be his. Each one of us here are her children. And other churches are her sisters, and believers in other churches are children of her sisters. Now, let's start again.

To the Lady and her Children whom I Love in the Truth – vv1-3

*The elder, To the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth— [we love you] 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.*

We saw a lot about love and the truth in 3 John. The truth is the message about Jesus; it’s a message that we believe and we live out, we walk in it, and that daily-life-in-the-truth is full of love. This love includes feelings, but that’s not the center.

1 John tells us we know what love is by two actions. One, we know what love is because the Father sent his one and only Son to make atonement for our sins. That’s how we know what love is. Two, we know what love is because Christ laid down his life for us. That’s our second definition. When we talk about loving one another, it begins with these two pictures.

Gaius was kind and generous to travelling Christians. That’s the love that living in the truth has in mind. Diotrephes was bossy and unkind to others in the church. That’s not love. And no matter what Diotrephes *says* he believes, that’s not *walking* in the truth.

John loves the lady, which is the church, and her children, the people in the church. He loves them in the truth. He loves them, he says, *because of* the truth, which lives in us, and will be with us forever. Daily life in the truth is full of love.

Some of your Children Walk in Truth v4

*It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.*

This is a loaded sentence. *It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth.* SOME of your children? Why only some? What happened to the other children? We’ll find out, but we know already that some of the believers walk in the truth, which is what the Father commanded, and that others do not.

Old John says this as kindly as he can, but he does not ignore the problem. In 3 John, he said that he had no greater joy than to hear that his people were walking in the truth. So here, he writes, *it gives me great joy to find that some walk in the truth.*

Just as the Father commanded us. These people, who don’t walk in the truth, people like Diotrephes, they are not doing what the Father commanded. That’s the issue. Not that *John* is being pushed out. Rather, they are not walking as the *Father* commanded. But happily, some are.

The Father commanded us to walk in the truth. Not John’s command. The Father commanded it.

### I Ask that we Love One Another v5-6

*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. 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.*

John had already written the Gospel of John, and these people have read it, or at least they know what John's Gospel says. In John 13, Jesus gave a new command to his followers: that they would love one another. That's what John has in mind here.

When Jesus said it to his followers, it was a new command. But now John writes years later, and they've known that command a long time. So in this letter, John has no interest in giving his own new command. No, nothing new here, he asks only that they remember the command they've had since they came to faith, going right back to the life of Jesus. Love each other as I loved you.

When he talks about the Father's command, in v4, he's speaking of the same thing. John mentions the word "command" three times in vv4-6. He's talking about the same command right through, which comes from Jesus, and therefore also the Father: love one another.

Love means walking in his commands, he says. Two times in John's Gospel, Jesus says, "the one who loves me will keep my commands." (ch 14) *Jesus* loved us by laying down his life for us. We love *Jesus* by obeying his commands. *Because* we love Jesus, we obey his command, which is to love *one another*.

My brothers and sisters, that is right at the core of what we're about. Jesus loved us by laying down his life for us. We love Jesus in return by obeying his commands. Because we love Jesus, we love one another.

Most of you can remember times when I did not do this. You would be right. I don't do this well, and I'm not pretending to. But this is where the Spirit is taking us, and we need to know that.

### Jesus Christ Came in the Flesh – vv7-11

*I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world.*

I said earlier that the truth is a message that we believe and we live out, we walk in it, and that daily-life-in-the-truth is full of love. John now goes after that message that we believe. It is a message about Jesus, and in particular, the message says that "Jesus Christ came in the flesh."

This comes up also in 1 John, which was written a little later (I think) but about the same problem. In 1 John (4:2) we read, *Every spirit that confesses "Jesus Christ in the flesh" is from God.* That's how we know a spirit is from God. What's this about "Jesus Christ in the flesh"?

## “Flesh” in Greek Thinking

Flesh means human weakness. It can mean our moral weakness, like when Paul says to put away the actions of the flesh. Flesh can also mean our physical bodies, like when Paul says “the life I now live in the flesh.” That is mostly what Greek thinking had in mind, failing human bodies.

They did have a point. Human bodies. If we don’t wash all the time, we stink. We get sick and we puke. Yuck. We have bad breath, and our teeth rot and fall out. Our bodies produce stinky gas once on a while, hopefully not in church.

And when we go to the bathroom, it smells bad in there afterward. All the beautiful men and women we see on TV, the bathroom does not smell any better after they’ve been there than when we’ve been there. They hope we don’t think about that, but it’s true.

And sometimes our bodies hurt, sometimes they hurt a lot, and then, to cap it off, we die! And dead bodies get really gross if we don’t tidy them up and hide them away real fast.

I know I am not supposed to talk about this stuff in sermons. But you know it is true, and Greeks thought about this, and they decided did not like the flesh. It was all failing and unpleasant. The Greeks liked what was spiritual, mind and reasoning, and what was rational, they like ideas and thoughts. Bodies were bad, spirit and mind and thought were good.

And the Christian message is that Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, came in the *flesh*? He came into all that gross trouble? No, that cannot be the truth. They will believe in the Christ, and the Son of God, but not the flesh. That the Christ, the Son of God, would come into all that was difficult and unpleasant about human bodies and life? Would come in the flesh? Surely not.

The Jews didn’t buy that Greek thinking. God made all we see and touch, and he thought it was good. Once he had made male and female, and looked at it all, it was very good. Jewish thinkers knew there were troubles, but God made it all and said it was very good, so it was. And that is what the whole Bible teaches. And the resurrection takes care of the bad stuff.

John’s Gospel says, “*and the Word became flesh.*” That’s the sticking point here.

## Cerinthus (Ker–IN–thus)

Cerinthus was a false teacher that lived in the last part of the first century, about the same time as we think John wrote these letters. We know about Cerinthus from early Christian writers who tell us about him. Cerinthus taught that Jesus was born of Joseph and Mary in the normal way, no virgin birth. And when Jesus was baptized, the Divine Christ descended on him to empower him.

When Jesus did miracles, Cerinthus said it was the heavenly Christ, in Jesus, that did the miracles. Before Jesus was crucified, the Christ left Jesus and went back to heaven.

Jesus died, Cerinthus said, and God did raise him, but he lived an ordinary life after that. Heavenly Christ was not born, and did not die. No Christ in the flesh. The Christ was seated at God's right hand while Jesus of Nazareth carried on his earthly life.

We know that Cerinthus taught this, and we know about when we lived. We do not know if he connects directly to John's churches. It sure seems to fit, but we'll leave it at that.

We do learn from Cerinthus that people were teaching such things in John's time. People who liked Christianity, and also liked Greek thought, brought them together like Cerinthus did. That the early fathers wrote about this means it was a real problem in some churches.

So when John writes, *I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world*, that's the kind of teaching John means.

1 John makes this a test of spirits: *Every spirit that confesses "Jesus Christ in the flesh" is from God*. This makes it sound like others in the church claimed that their teaching, *against Christ's flesh*, was sent to them by God himself. John says, "don't you believe that."

On our covenant Sunday we recite the Apostles Creed. The middle part of the Creed goes back to about the year 180, about 100 years after John, and it was written to correct that same kind of teaching. Listen to how the creed pulls together Christ's humanity and his lordship:

"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was *conceived, born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried*. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead."

Conceived, born, suffered, crucified, died, and buried. That only happens in the flesh. This goes after those *who do not acknowledge that Jesus Christ came in the flesh*. In the first two hundred years of the church, some form of this was probably their most troublesome heresy. We fight for Jesus' deity. The early fathers fought long and hard to keep Christ's humanity clear.

## Incarnation

Advent begins next Sunday, but this is already an Advent sermon. The biggest miracle of Christmas is not Christ's virgin birth. It is the Word was made flesh. In the words of Hebrews, "he was made in every way as we are, and he was tempted in every way as we are." The Eternal Son became one of us – that's Majesty of Christmas.

The Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, was conceived, was born, he suffered, he was humiliated and crucified. He died and was buried. God raised him on the third day.

At Christmas we sing, “but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.” Don’t you believe that. Jesus Christ came in the flesh. Baby Jesus wailed loudly, he sucked milk from his mother, he pooped, and then he slept. Then he woke up, and did it all again.

Here’s what John says about people who won’t acknowledge that Jesus Christ came in the flesh:

*Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that **you** do not lose what we 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. If anyone comes to you, and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work.*

I was taught that the deity of Christ was the important thing, that Jesus was truly God. The Bible teaches the deity of Christ, and John himself teaches that as clearly as anyone in the Bible.

But neither John nor any other NT writer warns believers about Christ’s deity the way John warns about his humanity. Here’s what John says about Christ’s flesh:

If people move away from Christ coming in the flesh, then they are following the deceiver and the antichrist, they have lost their reward, they have left behind the teaching of Christ, and they do not have God. Get that? They do not have God. Do not welcome such people, he says, do not share in their wicked work.

Wow! There is no part of the NT that speaks about Christ’s deity like that. I usually think I am doing Christ a favour by emphasizing his deity more than his humanity. John disagrees. We are always honour Christ by speaking clearly about his humanity. Christ came in the flesh.

What’s the Connection?

Walking in the truth means obeying the Father’s command, the command from the beginning, that we should love one another. Walking in the truth also means that we know Jesus Christ came in the flesh, came into all the common and unpleasant parts of being human in a body.

Is there a connection between loving one another, and holding a strong conviction about Christ’s humanity? I don’t know if John thinks these two are connected. And if he does, I don’t know what the connection is, and I will not guess.

What we know for sure is that the truth is Jesus Christ himself and the message about him. That message is the truth like nothing else. And daily life in the truth is a life that shows much love, and the people who walk in the truth also have a strong grip on the real flesh-and-blood humanity of our Lord.

PRAYER: Our Father, with your Son beside you, scars on his hands and feet; Father, your eternal Son became one of us. The Word became flesh. Jesus Christ came in the flesh. He was made in every way as we are, and tempted in every way as we are. As a result of many battles, he remained sinless. He became flesh. Help us hold on to this, and not waste it.

And God, you keep calling us to love one another, to walk in the truth and to love one another. So we submit to you again. We all do this well at times, and fail miserably at other times. This you know. We submit to you again, right now, we confess all of this, we know that your ways are right. We pray with open hands. May the God who brought light out of darkness shine in our lives, and bring out in us this generosity that began with you. We pray with open hands. Amen.

(response time)

BENEDICTION: May the Lord make our love increase and overflow, for each other and for everyone else. May he strengthen our hearts, so that we will be clean and ready for the presence of our God and Father, when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.