

George Philip Bible Readings

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THE SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

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Introduction

This short epistle was written about 90 A.D., by which time a fair part of the New Testament was in circulation in writing. There was therefore a recognised body of Christian truth, the preaching of which evoked persecution from the unbelieving world. This is to be expected. There was also danger arising from within the professing church from those who remained within it but no longer held to the fundamental truths of the Faith. This is the situation we have in our own generation. In v.7 John refers to these people as deceivers, for they not only pass themselves off as believers while no longer holding the saving truth of the Gospel, but they also pursue a policy of seeking to win people over to their own "unbelieving" position. All this they do *inside* the church, while claiming to be genuine, enlightened spiritual Christians. As we say so often, all this is to be expected Matt. 24:24; Luke 21:8; Rom. 16:17-19; Eph- 4:14; 5:6-7; 2 Thess 2:1-3, 9-12; Jude 3-4). But it does raise the practical problem as to what our attitude should be towards such people and how we are to deal with them. In the early church the little groups of believers would be visited by travelling preachers and teachers who would receive hospitality and be helped on their way, and this pattern was being abused by some more interested in the hospitality than the ministry. It was also being abused by those who lived by the generosity of the Christians and at the same time corrupted their faith by teaching falsehood. This epistle is John's answer to the situation.

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The chosen lady (elect lady AV) may be one specific person of some importance in one of the churches, or the reference may be to a particular church. If the reference is to an individual she seems to have had a large family, some of whom were no longer walking in the truth. If the reference is to a small group of believers, John is deliberately vague in using names lest the letter fall into the hands of people who would use it as an instrument of persecution. Whether the letter is to an individual or a group, the fact remains they are chosen by God, living together in the family fellowship of faith, and grounded in the truth. There is no better term to describe a church than "family", because all ages, personalities, and intellects are gathered together in one, belonging to each other, yet with individual lives and expressions, and all gathered under authority. The privileges and responsibilities are shared not only by the immediate family but by all those that have known the truth. This is how you can begin to love missionaries you have never seen and have known only by praying for them. Then, when they come home and visit the fellowship, you discover a bond has been forged which makes you members of each other. This is "because of the truth" (for the truth's sake AV) which we know and believe in common, and which dwells within us by the Spirit (John 8:32; 14: 16-18, 26). Christian fellowship is possible *only on the basis of truth commonly held* and not on the basis of common cultural or temperamental inclinations. This is the Christian unity that glorifies God, and it is a unity which is for ever.

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It is when hearts and lives are bound together in and by the truth of the Gospel that the benediction of God becomes a living reality in experience. We must hold the truth in faith *and* in obedience, else we are not true (Luke 6:46). And if we hold the truth we cannot allow ourselves to be unequally yoked together with those who deny the truth (2 Cor.6:14). This will mean the qualifying and even the ending of some relationships, which is a costly thing, but it has its compensations. Grace will be with us, says John. Those are indeed richly blessed who have in their souls the grace of God that brings salvation to them (Titus 2:11), the mercy from which all our hopes begin (Eph. 2:4), the peace which guards our hearts as in a garrison (Phil. 4:7). We could dwell for long on the three words of this assured benediction. Grace speaks of the favour and the smile of God, so utterly undeserved. Mercy brings us to the vast wells of everlasting forgiveness. Peace speaks of that serenity of spirit that is the heritage of those who have been pronounced righteous and safe by the great God of eternity. Think of all the people in John's record of the Gospel whose testimony concerning Jesus would be these very things of which we speak here. Read but one of these stories in John 8:1-11.

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We must not fail to note that the word "truth" appears four times in these first three verses, and at the same time the message of love is diffused right through them. These John brings together in the last phrase of today's verse. Love apart from truth deteriorates into sheer sentimentality, and truth apart from love becomes cold, clinical and even brutal. A loveless advocacy of the truth is a tremendous stumbling block to the witness of the Christian Church, and we cannot truly be heralds of salvation if we do not in fact care for the people to whom we preach. Yet our love must not be blind, and we must see clearly what people are, and what they are not. This epistle is essentially practical, dealing as we shall see with the abuse of hospitality; and in this context love is often required to deny kindness lest a lie be perpetuated. What lie do we mean? The lie that truth does not matter, that people can be good and nice Christians even though they have departed from the truth. But lest we end today thinking too sternly even about love, let us dwell on the heavenly music contained in the words, "The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father." The mystery of the Godhead is here, the Lord Jesus is the Christ.

On the one hand we have the man Jesus, and on the other "the Son of the Father". Heaven and earth are brought close to each other, for the heavenly Son was made flesh and dwelt among us. This is truth, and this is love.

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John continues to make clear that walking in the truth and walking in love belong together, for both are commandments of the Father. We may not opt for one or the other. What God has joined together let not anyone put asunder. Falling into error concerning the truth of the Gospel and failing to love are not therefore simply unfortunate defects of personality, they are sin. Note how John implies here that not all the family were walking in the truth. Try to imagine their reaction when this epistle was read when the Christians gathered together. Would the "rebels" smile arrogantly and impenitently as if to signify they dismissed the rebuke as irrelevant? How would you react? Do we not often turn aside the arrows of God's challenge and rebuke by pointing the finger at the faults of another? Is that the attitude of truth and love? We may not excuse ourselves by pleading lack of faith, for we are commanded to believe. Have faith in God! And the strengthening of faith comes through obedience to the truth. In like manner love grows by obedience. But underlying all John's words is the dynamic persuasion that Truth has been revealed and received and must be stood by regardless of the consequences. We may be accused of hair-splitting in our determination to be loyal to the truth as it has been delivered to the saints (Jude 3), and we shall be charged with the disturbance of the peace of many congregations. But the fact remains that God has spoken and we dare not rewrite His speech. If the truth be told, the desolation of the Christian Church has come from a denial of the truth rather than the defence of it.

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The first half of this epistle, with its two-fold emphasis on truth and love, divides into two parts. Verses 1-3 form the introduction, full of the grace and truth by which we have been brought to salvation and in which we have assurance concerning the future. We have been wrought upon by God in His grace and this is salvation. Verses 4-6 emphasise the need for spiritual health, integrity and obedience in the inner life of the fellowship, and herein is a very basic lesson for both congregation and individual. "Who can fight for God and truth, enslaved by lies and sin?" (Hymn "O God of truth" Hughes). It is only to the extent that God has His way within us that He can work through us. But John's appeal here to the fellowship and his entreaty for spiritual obedience in truth and love is founded upon what he declares in the next verse (7). He is aware of the activity of Hell militating against God and His Christ, and he sees how failure on the part of the faithful could become the breach in the walls whereby the tides of antichrist could sweep in and desolate the work of the Kingdom. John is about to show us that our carelessness about the truth and our lovelessness towards our brothers and sisters are signs of the presence and the triumph of the Devil himself. It is one thing to guard against the assaults of the Devil when he comes like a roaring lion, but another to be watchfully alert to his more subtle advances, full of specious half-truths. But more of this tomorrow.

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"John now refers to the false teachers who were troubling the Church. 'Entered into' would be better rendered 'have gone out into'. The meaning is either that these deceivers had gone out from among the true believers, or that they had gone out on a mission for anti-Christ. Commentators seem to favour the latter interpretation, and the meaning in this case would be that they had been claimed and commissioned by the prince of darkness to go out into the world as apostles of evil and destruction. This idea finds expression also in the Book of Revelation, where the trinity of evil - the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet - apes the Holy Trinity and parodies the Gospel." (Rev. J. Philip) This comment raises a frightening subject. It is possible for those we have known in the fellowship of the Church to become active agents on behalf of the kingdom of hell. They may be duped by Satan, but they have given the prince of evil the opportunity and occasion for his wiles; and in this case they are willing and therefore responsible for their destructive influence. It was Judas, *one of the twelve*, who sold Jesus to the powers of evil working through men (Matt. 26:20-25; Mark 14:17-21; Luke 22: 21-34, 47-48; John 18:1-4). In like manner it was Pilate who, through weakness and compromise, set the seal upon the execution of the Son of God. Satan desires to have us. It is dangerous to trifle.

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Read v.8 "Look to yourselves, that *you* lose not those things which *we* have wrought, but that you receive a full reward." This is important because, although a minister may be grieved sorely when his people slide back from God and become enamoured of false teachers (and in that sense loses a great deal), yet he cannot lose any of his eternal reward for faithfulness of service and ministry. But when people have been brought to Christ and then turn away, for reasons best known to themselves, *they* do in fact lose eternally as well as temporally. This may not be a matter of the salvation of our souls, although Jesus said it was the man who endured to the end who would be saved (Matt.10:22) and continuance in the truth is the only real evidence of conversion by the truth. This places a great question mark over against many, including ministers, who were "converted" in earlier days but no longer hold their old position. Do they no longer believe the truth that saved their souls? John in these verses is dealing with the question of reward for service. This can be lost in greater or lesser degree (1 John 2:28; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 3:11). We need to begin to take seriously the words of Jesus in such passages as Matt. 25:14-30.

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Moffat translates v.9, "Anyone who is 'advanced' and will not remain in the doctrine of Christ, does not possess God." John is firing an arrow at the "advanced thinkers" of his day, those claiming on intellectual grounds to have a richer fullness of the truth than the common herd of believers. Far from recognising them as advanced, John brands them as transgressors, those who have cut across the main line of the truth of the faith once delivered to the saints. A great deal of what is called "avant-garde" theology John simply calls heresy and says that God is not in it. This is the situation we have in the church today. Many are so obsessed with a desire to "be with it" that they forget it is more important to be with God; and to be with God and of God involves an abiding in the doctrine of Christ. The true man of God will never allow himself to be moved away from the great doctrines of Biblical and historical revelation: the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Resurrection. When we speak of the Spirit leading and giving new insights we must remember that the Spirit will never lead us away from the truth as it is in Jesus. The Spirit will lead us into ever deeper and fuller appreciation and appropriation of all that was done by God in Christ for us, but He will never lead us past Jesus or beyond Jesus, for that would be to launch us into unknown and unexplored regions where we would drift aimlessly. When theology departs from Christ it becomes speculation and this is a fickle and adjustable thing of little use for the practicalities of life. Is the test of Isaiah 8:19-20 too stringent? No! We depart from Scripture at our peril.

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In his commentary John Stott suggests three things to be kept in mind in the interpretation of these difficult and stern verses. In the first place John is referring not to casual visitors but to teachers set on a deliberate policy of

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propagating false doctrine. If a person is set on doing harm to the truth and to the fellowship we should have no dealings with him. In the second place John may be speaking here of the church giving official welcome to false teachers rather than to the question of private hospitality. If we think of inviting a Mormon, a Jehovah's Witness, a Christadelphian, or for that matter, an orthodox Roman Catholic to our pulpit, we should be able to see the point of John's words. We may not receive such nor help them on their way to continue their undermining work. In the third place John has been speaking about those who deny the essential deity of Christ and he has marked out such as instruments of antichrist. Dare we invite, entertain and encourage such teachers? There is no suggestion in John's words that we should ostracise anyone who does not agree with us in the most minute point. There is no place for graceless exclusivism. But where the truth of the Gospel is at stake it is tolerance, not intolerance, that is the sin. We must ever be on guard lest our professed tolerance is simply an indifference to truth!

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It will be good today to gather together some scripture references in connection with yesterday's note. The classic passage is, of course, Gal. 1:6-9. But lest we get proud of our graceless theological position and powerless lives, consider Luke 9:1-2, 40, 46-50. The recognition of division and conflict and the action that needs to be taken are spoken of in Rom. 16:17-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-11; 2 Thess. 3:6; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; 4:14-15; Titus 3:8-11. But again, lest we become harsh and censorious and proud of our impeccable standards of theology, consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-36. May God bless to all our hearts this day's readings in His holy Word.

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We continue our study of Christian intolerance because it is so important. It is all very well to insist that the Christian standard is love, but love must never be shown to one person in a way that is calculated to do serious harm to another. We may be "tolerant" towards a man who takes drugs, but in doing so we may be guilty if that man introduces his girl-friend to drugs and she destroys herself. The same applies to smoking, drinking, gambling and many other pursuits. And the same is true with what we believe, for therein the eternal salvation or damnation of our souls is involved. The spirit of the age declares that it does not matter what you believe so long as you are sincere. This heresy has conditioned the thinking of a whole generation inside and outside the church, and the result is that practically a whole generation has lost its soul. Hand in hand with the movement that has siphoned away the essential truth of the Christian message and substituted a "gospel of humanitarianism" or "a justifiable agnosticism" there goes the movement of "free lovers" and "self-expressionist anarchists". Is the Christian church to stand by in silence as the growing generation is poisoned? On occasions the church has invited the prophets of these movements to address its public meetings! Could anything be more ridiculous? But we all fall into the trap, for this issue involves the examination of the newspapers we read and the programmes we watch. Are these things safe to take into our homes where children look and ask questions? So it is with books, conversations, company and pursuits. Mark what militates against holiness and the interests of Christ and avoid it!

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There is a great place for personal discussion, face to face, for it is the time when words can be mellowed and qualified and interpreted by a look in the eye, a smile on the face or a gesture of the hands. Cold print can be very cold, and even harsh, and when the wrong meaning or emphasis is taken from the words, an impression is made that can become virtually permanent. (Keep in mind that some so-called Christian books can be dangerous). By the time two people meet again to talk a barrier of reaction may have been built which almost precludes any possibility of profitable conversation. How we should strive to prevent such barriers being formed, for they destroy fellowship. Note how John refrains from saying more *at this time*, knowing that it would be unwise. This is something we need to learn, for impetuous speech can be a very disruptive thing. There are matters which are best kept quiet and never spoken about, for no good can come of them. It is time we

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were learning to abandon our childish "tell-tale" practice, for it smacks too much of a desire to gain some personal advantage. This is all so contrary to the "face-to-face" spirit which John speaks of here and which is the basis of fellowship that matures to fullness of joy. But let our last word be one of practical encouragement. Limited as letters may be, and poor substitute though they be for living fellowship, it is nevertheless true that a letter can be an instrument of blessing to writer and receiver alike. Take up your pen and write to some missionary abroad or lonely housebound person at home, and do it without making them feel obliged to answer. You will minister to one of Christ's people in this way, and in doing so, you do it to Him.

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