

# Commentary on 2 John

By David Guzik



## II John: Walking in the Truth

*"This epistle is more remarkable for the spirit of Christian love which it breathes than for anything else. It contains scarcely anything that is not found in the preceding; and out of the thirteen verses there are at least eight which are found, either in so many words or in sentiment, precisely the same with those of the first epistle." (Adam Clarke)*

### A. Greeting

#### 1. (1-2) To The Elect Lady And Her Children

a. **The elder**: The writer of this book identifies himself as **the Elder**. Presumably, his first readers knew exactly who he was, and from the earliest times, Christians have understood this was the apostle John writing.

i. "John the apostle, who was now a very old man, generally supposed to be about ninety, and therefore uses the term presbyter or elder, not as the name of an *office*, but as designated his advanced age. He is allowed to have been the oldest of all the apostles, and to have been the only one who died a natural death." (Clarke)

b. **To the elect lady and her children**: Perhaps this was an individual Christian woman John wanted to warn and encourage by this letter. Or, the term might be a symbolic way of addressing this particular congregation.

i. "The phrase is, however, more likely to be a personification than a person - not the church at large but some local church over which the elder's jurisdiction was recognized, *her children* being the church's individual members." (Stott)

ii. "This appears to have been some noted person, whom both her singular piety, and rank in the world, made eminent, and capable of having great influence for the support of the Christian interest." (Poole)

iii. John probably did not name himself, **the elect lady** or **her children** by name because this was written during a time of persecution. Perhaps John didn't want to implicate anyone by name in a written letter. If the letter was intercepted and the authorities knew who it was written to by name, it might mean death for those persons.

c. **Whom I love in truth, and not only I**: Whomever **the elect lady** was, she was loved by all who **have known the truth**. If we know and love the truth, we will love those who also know and love the truth - **the truth which abides in us** also lives in others who know the truth.

i. We see John quite focused on the idea of truth, as he was in all of his writings. He used the word *truth* some thirty-seven times in his New Testament writings.

ii. This shows that what binds Christians together is not social compatibility or political compatibility or class compatibility. What binds us together is a common **truth**. This is why truth is important to Christians.

d. **Will be with us forever**: The truth does not change. The truth will be true **forever**, and we will have the truth forever in eternity. Many people today think that the truth changes from age to age and from generation to generation, but the Bible knows that the truth **will be with us forever**.

## 2. (3) John's Salutation To His Readers

- a. **Grace, mercy, and peace:** John presents a slightly expanded version of the standard greeting in New Testament letters. He didn't just wish these for his readers; he confidently bestowed them by saying they **will be with you from God the Father**.
- b. **In truth and love:** John can hardly write a verse without mentioning these two of his favorite topics. The **grace, mercy, and peace** God has for us are all given **in truth and love**. Apart from God's **truth and love**, we can never really have **grace, mercy, and peace**.
  - i. "What deep, sweet rhythm of meaning there is in the first three verses of this letter! One reads them over and over again. Oh, that the grace, mercy, and peace, may be with us, from God the Father, and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and in love." (Meyer)
- c. **The Son of the Father:** "The apostle still keeps in view the *miraculous conception* of Christ; a thing which the *Gnostics* absolutely denied; a doctrine which is at the ground work of our salvation."

## B. How To Walk

### 1. (4) John's Joy To Find They Are Walking In Truth

- a. **I have rejoiced greatly:** This is a pastor's heart - to know that his people are **walking in truth**. While **truth** is not the *only* concern of a pastor, it is a great concern; and it is a great comfort for a pastor to see those he loves and cares for **walking in truth**.
  - i. "The *children* mentioned here may either be *her own children*, or those *members of the Church* which were under her care, or some of *both*." (Clarke)
- b. **I have found some of your children walking in truth:** John rejoiced because when God's people are **walking in truth** they also abide in God. The same idea is expressed in 1 John 2:24: *Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.* Truth is not only important for its own sake, but also our **walking in truth** shows we are walking with the Lord.
  - i. Trapp on the idea of **walking in the truth**: "Not taking a step or two, not breaking or leaping over the hedge to avoid a piece of foul way, but persisting in a Christian course, not starting aside to the right hand or the left."

### 2. (5) The Commandment To Love One Another

- a. **I plead with you, lady:** John was not too proud to beg on such an important matter; not when it came to something as vital in the Christian life as the **commandment** that we must **love one another**.
- b. **Not as though I wrote a new commandment:** John knew this was nothing new to his readers (he repeated the theme all through 1 John and his gospel). Yet because it was so essential, it had to be repeated and used as a reminder.
- c. **That we love one another:** The integrity of our Christian life can be measured by our love for one another (as in John 13:35 and 1 John 4:20-21).

### 3. (6) Showing The Love Of God

- a. **This is love, that we walk according to His commandments:** If we love God, we will obey His commandments. We do this not because we think His commandments are heavy burdens, but because we see that they are best for us. They are guides and gifts to us from God.
- b. **Walk according to His commandments:** Real love will walk this way. Perhaps John warned against those who thought the only important thing in the Christian life was a vague love that had no heart for obedience.
  - i. "Perhaps you fail to distinguish between love and the emotion of love. They are not the same. We may love without being directly conscious of love, or being able to estimate its strength and passion. Here is the solution to many of our questionings: They love who obey." (Meyer)

#### 4. (7-9) A Warning Against The Presence And Dangers Of False Teachers

a. **Many deceivers have gone out into the world**: John was aware false teachers were a danger to the church in his day.

i. "The immediate problem in [2 John] is that of traveling teachers or missionaries. According to Christian ethics all who thus traveled about were to be shown hospitality by Christians in the town to which they came." (Boice)

b. **This is a deceiver**: John mainly had in mind the danger in his own time, the danger of those who thought that the Jesus, being God, could have no *real* connection with the material world. They said that He only had an *apparent* connection with the material world.

i. To combat this, John made a plain declaration: we must **confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh**. This means Jesus came as a real man in His first coming, but also means He will come as a human being - although glorified humanity, and that added to His eternal deity - a real flesh and blood Jesus will come again to the earth.

c. **This is a deceiver and an antichrist**: Against this false idea of Jesus, John insists those **who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh** are the deceivers and in have the spirit of the **antichrist**.

i. John warned us against these antichrists in his first letter (1 John 2:18-23, 4:3). They are those who not only oppose Jesus, but also offer a substitute "Christ."

ii. This spirit of antichrist will one day find its ultimate fulfillment in *the Antichrist*, who will lead humanity in an end-times rebellion against God.

d. **Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God**: There is nothing noble, sincere, courageous, or admirable in a *false* Jesus. To deny the Biblical Jesus is *always* to reject the Father and the Son both. John here draws a critical line of truth, over which it is heresy to *transgress*.

i. In our own day, we must deal with modern denials of the Biblical Jesus with the same passion John did in his day. Today, with our "scholarly" denials of Jesus and the historical record of the gospels, it is more important than ever to know who the true Jesus is according to the Bible and to love and serve the true Jesus.

ii. "To say *no* to God's way of revealing himself is to say *no* to God himself, for he will not let himself be known by men except on his own terms." (Marshall)

e. **Transgresses**: The word *transgresses* has the idea of "going beyond a boundary." We never go "beyond" the teaching of Jesus, of who He is and what He has done for us. Any one who thinks we have or should go beyond what the Bible plainly says about Jesus *transgresses*.

i. "There is a true progress in the Christian life, but it is progress based upon a deeper knowledge of the historical, biblical Christ. Progress on any other ground may be called progress, but it is a progress that leaves God behind and is, therefore, not progress at all." (Boice)

ii. "When the teaching of the Bible needs to be supplemented by some 'key' to the Bible or by some new revelation, it is a sure sign that 'advanced' doctrine is being put forth." (Marshall)

f. **Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for**: To depart from the true Jesus means you put yourself in jeopardy to lose the things the apostles and other faithful saints **worked for**. This shows us that it isn't enough for us to start out right, we must finish in faith to **receive a full reward**.

#### 5. (10-11) Instructions For Dealing With The False Teachers

a. **If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine**: If someone comes to us, denying the true doctrine of Jesus, and promoting a false doctrine of Jesus, John says we should give no hospitality, no aid, to the ones who promote their own false version of Jesus. To do so is to share **in his evil deeds**.

i. "The words mean, according to the eastern use of them, 'Have no religious connection with him, nor act towards him so as to induce others to believe you acknowledge him as a brother.'" (Clarke)

- ii. "Suppose the visiting teacher claimed to be a Christian missionary or even a prophet but taught what was clearly false doctrine. Hospitality would demand that he be provided for, but to do so would seem to be participation in the spread of his false teachings. Should he be received or not?" (Boice)
- b. **He who greets him:** John means **greet** in a much more involved context than our own. In that culture, it meant to show hospitality and give aid. Yet, for the weak or unskilled believer, it is best if they do not even *greet* (in the sense of speaking to) those who promote a false Jesus (like the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses).
- i. These words sound severe, but John has not lost his love. We must consider these three points:
- John is not talking about *all* error, but only error which *masquerades* as true Christianity.
  - John is not talking about all who *hold* the error which masquerades as true Christianity, but about those who *teach* those errors which masquerade as true Christianity.
  - John is not talking about all *teachers* who err, but those who err in the most *fundamental* truths, and those who are active in spreading those fundamental errors.
- ii. This does not mean that we should have nothing to do with those who are caught by the cults. As John indicates, we should make a distinction between those who *teach* these Christ-denying doctrines (those who **bring this doctrine**) and those who merely *believe* the doctrines without trying to spread them.
- c. **Do not receive him into your house nor greet him:** This may also be translated *do not receive him into the house*. John may be referring most specifically to not allowing these heretical teachers to come into **the house** where Christians met together.
- i. "Perhaps, therefore, it is not private hospitality which John is forbidding so much as an official welcome into the congregation, with the opportunity this would afford to the false teacher to propagate his errors." (Stott)
- ii. "We see how such [false] teachers were treated in the apostolic Church. They held no communion with them; afforded them no support, as *teachers*; but *did not persecute* them." (Clarke)
- d. **Shares in his evil deeds:** We are defined by what we *reject* as much as by what we *accept*. In this, some are so *open minded* that they are *empty headed*. It is wise to keep an open mind on many things; but one would never keep an open mind about which poisons a person might try. You may say *yes* to all the right things; but one must also say *no* to what is false and evil. We need to become good at rejecting what should be rejected.
- i. "They were persons who claimed to be leaders; they were advanced thinkers, they were progressive. The Gnostic teachers of the time were claiming that while the gospel of the historic Jesus might be all very well for unenlightened people, they had a profounder knowledge. Such were to receive no hospitality." (Morgan)
- ii. In the late 19th Century, the rise of theological liberalism brought forth generations of Christian pastors, leaders, and theologians who denied many of the fundamentals of Biblical Christianity. Though it was a broad and varied movement, at its root theological liberalism thought that Christianity had to re-evaluate all its doctrines in the light of modern science, philosophy, and thinking. They rejected the idea that a doctrine was true simply because the Bible taught it; it also had to be proved true by reason and experience. They believed that the Bible was not an inspired message from a real God, but the work of men who were limited by the ignorance and superstitions of their time. For them, the Bible was not either inspired or supernatural. The importance of the Bible and its message was not in its literal or historical truth, but in its changing spiritual message.
- iii. Sadly, Germany took the lead in theological liberalism and German philosophers and theologians had a profound impact on British and American Christians. Men like Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and the Tübingen School of Theology, and Adolf Harnack. To promote or support these men or those who believe in or advance their Bible-denying theology is to *share in their evil deeds*.

## C. Conclusion

### 1. (12) John Anticipates A Future Visit

a. **I hope to come to you and speak face to face**: We must generally sympathize with John's preference for personal, face to face communication rather than the writing of letters - though we are thankful for this letter.

### 2. (13) Conclusion

a. **The children of your elect sister**: Telling us that the *elect lady* (2 John 1) has an **elect sister**, and that they both have **children** does little to identify with certainty who John is writing to. Perhaps all it tells us is that if John used the term *elect lady* as a symbol for the church, he used it rather loosely (saying that she has a sister and children). The most likely idea is that the *elect lady* (a particular church) had an **elect sister** - other "sister" churches from which John brings a greeting.

b. **The children of your elect sister**: This last reference to the **elect sister** and her **children** remind us that though we must be on guard against false teachers, the true followers of Jesus are more than just our group. If we allow our desire to defend the truth to make us unloving and intolerant, Satan has won a great victory.

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# Commentary on 3 John

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## III John: Following Good Examples

"But it has been the lot both of the *minor prophets* and the *minor epistles* to be generally neglected; for with many readers *bulk* is every thing; and, no *magnitude*, no goodness." (Adam Clarke, on the shorter books of the Bible)

### A. Greeting and introduction

#### 1. (1) The Writer And The Reader

a. **The Elder**: The writer of this book identifies himself simply as **the Elder**. Presumably, the first readers knew who this was, and from the earliest times, Christians have understood that this was the Apostle John writing, the same John who wrote the Gospel of John, 1 and 2 John, and the Book of Revelation.

i. Perhaps he does not directly refer to himself for the same reason he does not directly refer to his readers in 2 John - the threat of persecution may be making direct reference unwise; and of course, unnecessary.

b. **To the beloved Gaius**: We don't know if this specific **Gaius** is connected with the other men by this name mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 19:19, 20:4; 1 Corinthians 1:14; Romans 16:23).

i. The identification is difficult because **Gaius** was a very common name in the Roman Empire.

#### 2. (2-4) A Blessing For Faithful Gaius

a. **Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things**: The word for **prosper** literally means "to have a good journey." It metaphorically means to succeed or prosper. It is like saying, "I hope things go well for you."

i. "Both verbs [for **prosper** and **be in health**] belonged to the everyday language of letter writing" (Stott). This phrase was so common that sometimes it was condensed into only initials, and everyone knew what the writer meant just from the initials.

ii. The abbreviation used in Latin was SVBEEV, meaning *Si vales, bene est; ego valeo* - "If you are well, it is good; I am well."

b. **I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers**: John used this common phrase in his sending of best wishes and blessings to **Gaius**. Some have wrongly taken this as a guarantee of perpetual wealth and perfect health for the Christian.

i. Of course, we should *always* remember that God wants our best and plans only good for us. Often present material prosperity and physical health are part of that good He has for us - and this prosperity and health are absolutely promised as the *ultimate* destiny of all believers.

ii. Yet, for the present time, God may - according to His all-wise plan - use a lack of material prosperity and physical health to promote greater prosperity and health in the scale of eternity.

iii. Nevertheless, *some* live in poverty and disease simply because they do not seek God's best, follow God's principles, and walk in faith. As well, there are *some others* who say we should use God's general promises of blessing as a way to indulge a carnal desire for ease, comfort, and luxury.

c. **Just as your soul prospers:** John here made an analogy between the condition of our health and the condition of our soul. Many Christians would be desperately ill if their physical health was instantly in the same state as their spiritual health.

d. **I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth:** John's goodwill towards Gaius came from his understanding that he walked in the truth. Nothing pleased John more than to know that his **children walk in truth**.

i. John knew that Gaius walked in truth because **brethren came and testified of the truth** that was in Gaius. His walk of truth was noticed by others, and they could talk about it because they saw it.

e. **That my children walk in truth:** This means more than living with correct doctrine. "What is it to 'walk in truth'? It is not walking in *the* truth, or else some would suppose it meant that John was overjoyed because they were sound in doctrine, and cared little for anything else. His joyous survey did include their orthodoxy in creed, but it reached far beyond." (Spurgeon)

i. To **walk in truth** means to walk consistent with the truth you believe. If you believe that you are fallen, then walk wary of your fallenness. If you believe you are a child of God, then walk like a child of heaven. If you believe you are forgiven, the walk like a forgiven person.

ii. To **walk in truth** means to walk in a way that is real and genuine, without any phoniness or concealment.

## B. Learning From Good And Bad Examples

### 1. (5-8) Gaius: A Good Example

a. **You do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers:** John praised Gaius for his hospitality. This may seem somewhat trivial to us, but it is not to God. This is a practical outworking of the essential command to love one another; it is love in action.

i. This was a great compliment: **you do faithfully whatever you do**. Whatever God gives us to do, we should do it **faithfully**. Jesus said that when we see Him face to face some will hear the words, *well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.* (Matthew 25:21) Of the good servant, it is said he was *faithful*.

b. **Send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God:** In that day, Christian travelers in general and itinerant ministers in particular were greatly dependent upon the hospitality of other Christians. John knew that when Christians assist those who contend for the truth, they become **fellow workers for the truth**.

i. The reward for these support people is the same as those who are out on the front lines. 1 Samuel 30:21-25 shows this principle, where the spoils are distributed equally among those who fought and those who supported. King David understood that the supply lines were just as vital as the soldiers, and God would reward both soldiers and supporters properly and generously.

ii. Jesus promised that even the help offered in a cup of cold water to one of His children would not be forgotten when God brings His reward (Matthew 10:42).

iii. This also explains why John would pray for the prosperity of Gaius: he used his resources in a godly way, being a blessing to others. If God blessed him with more, others would be blessed more also.

c. **Taking nothing from the Gentiles:** The ancient world of the early church was filled with the missionaries and preachers of various religions, and they often supported themselves by taking offerings from the general public. But John said that these Christian missionaries should take **nothing from the Gentiles** (non-Christians). Instead of soliciting funds from the general public they were to look to the support of fellow Christians.

d. **In a manner worthy of God:** Christians are not only called to help, but to help **in a manner worthy of God**. We are to do our best to help others excellently.

i. Christians must first see that they are doing something to help the spread of the gospel. Then they must see that they do it **in a manner worthy of God**. God calls every one of us to have a part in the great commission, the command of Matthew 28:19: *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing*

*them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* One can have a part by going or have a part by helping, but everyone has a part and should do it well.

ii. Jesus said, *He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward.* (Matthew 10:40-41)  
This should make us consider how we receive and help those who are preach the gospel.

## 2. (9-11) Diotrephes: A Bad Example

a. **But Diotrephes:** John publicly rebuked a man named **Diotrephes**, and he rebuked him by name. In rebuking an individual by name, the apostle of love did not act outside of love. Instead, he followed the clear command of the Scriptures (Romans 16:17) and the example of other apostles (2 Timothy 4:14-15).

i. However, any such public rebuke must be made only when necessary, and we must be careful to not judge a brother against any standard that we ourselves would not be judged (Matthew 7:1-2).

ii. By presenting himself as a "prominent Christian leader" (at least in his own mind), **Diotrephes** knew that he was open to public criticism - just as much as he would publicly criticize the apostle John and his associates (**prating against us with malicious words**).

b. **Who loves to have the preeminence among them:** Simply, the problem for **Diotrephes** was *pride*. In his pride, he did not receive the apostles such as John. This was in contrast to the humble hospitality of Gaius, who walked in the truth.

i. We can imagine a man like Diotrephes, a leader in the church in some city, looking at John and saying to himself, "Why should these big shot apostles get all the attention and honor? Look at my ministry! Isn't it just as good?" And pride would lead him, like many others, to destruction.

ii. Boice on **who loves to have the preeminence among them:** "This is the original and greatest of all sins. It is the sin of Satan, who was unwilling to be what God had created him to be and who desired rather to be 'like the Most High' (Isa. 14:14). It is the opposite of the nature of Christ 'who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant'."

c. **Prating against us with malicious words:** Diotrephes not only failed to receive John and the other apostles, but he also spoke against them. His malicious gossip against the apostles showed what kind of man he really was.

i. "The Greek verb which is here translated 'gossiping' comes from a root which was used of the action of water in boiling up and throwing off bubbles. Since bubbles are empty and useless, the verb eventually came to mean indulgence in empty or useless talk. This was the nature of Diotrephes' slander, though, of course, the words were no less evil in that they were groundless." (Boice)

ii. "The word signifieth ... to talk big bubbles of words ... it is a metaphor taken from over-seething pots, that send forth a foam; or ... from overcharged stomachs, that must needs belch." (Trapp)

d. **Putting them out of the church:** Diotrephes not only used his influence to forbid others from showing hospitality to John or his associates; he even tried to excommunicate those who tried to show such hospitality.

i. "To begin with, a man named Diotrephes had assumed an unwarranted and pernicious authority in the church, so much so that by the time of the writing of this letter John's own authority had been challenged and those who had been sympathetic to John had been excommunicated from the local assembly. Moreover, due to this struggle, traveling missionaries had been rudely treated, including probably an official delegation from John." (Boice)

ii. The example of Diotrephes shows that those who love **to have the preeminence** also love to use whatever power they think they have as a sword against others.

e. Do not imitate what is evil, but what is good: John gave us two clear examples, one good (Gaius) and one bad (Diotrephes), and he now applies the point - follow the good, for we serve a good God and those who follow Him will likewise do good.

i. John did not excommunicate Diotrephes, though as an apostle he had the authority to do so. Instead, he simply exposed him - and he trusted that discerning Christians would avoid Diotrephes as they should.

### 3. (12) Demetrius: A Good Example

a. Demetrius has a good testimony from all: John recommended this man to Gaius. Perhaps he was the one who carried the letter from John to Gaius, and John wanted Gaius to know that he was worthy of Christian hospitality.

b. Demetrius has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself: Demetrius was so faithful to the truth that even the truth was a witness on his behalf.

## C. Conclusion

### 1. (13-14a) John Explains Such A Short Letter To Gaius

a. I had many things to write: We can sympathize with John's preference for personal, face to face communication rather than the writing of letters. Yet we are thankful that John was forced to write, so that we have the record of this letter of 3 John.

### 2. (14b) Final Blessings

a. Our friends greet you: In addition to a familiar blessing of **peace** upon Gaius, John also reminded him (and us) of the common ties of Christians - even if they are separated by miles, they are still **friends** in Jesus, and appropriately they should greet one another.

b. Peace to you: This is a letter about contention and conflict; yet John appropriately ends the letter with a desire and expectation for **peace**. As Christians, we can and should have a sense of peace even in the midst of difficult times. Christians have the resources in Jesus Christ to have peace even in unsettled seasons.

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