

2 John 1-6

(Readings: 1 John 5:1-21; 2 John 1-13)

Learn To Discern!

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

When we read through the short second letter of the apostle John wasn't our attention particularly drawn by the verses 7 till 11? Doesn't that seem to be the obvious motivation for John to be writing this letter in the first place? Why else would he rush off this one papyrus to the churches?

Like we might write just the one page to a friend, and try to squeeze what we wanted to say on that page, so in that time most letters sent consisted of the one papyrus. A number of other New Testament letters show that they were also written on the one papyrus.

This is what we can easily think - that this letter is an obvious demonstration as to why we have to discern very carefully a wrong doctrine which could come into our churches. The more you dig into 2nd John, however, the less this theme of the one dominant concern becomes. In fact, 2nd John becomes more Johannine.

You see, John brings up again echoes of the themes he had dealt with before - though in relation to a certain situation this time. And really isn't that why we usually write those short pressing letters? We might think it's because of a special concern, but how often isn't it because that concern ties in with what we wanted to write to them anyhow?

Let's look into this letter, then, this way. That will still open us up into the specific purpose of this letter, but also connect us with more of John's writing, and therefore into much of God's Word. And so it is we come to the first aspect to our text, LEARNING TO DISCERN IS GOING THE RIGHT WAY.

The way John begins his letter is certainly an interesting way to address a church. He writes, "The elder to the chosen lady and her children."

Yet it couldn't be more appropriate. After all, the Church is the Bride, the dearly loved of the Groom, who is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. Each of us is a part of this - we are the children of the church - sons and daughters in God's family. Thus the Church is spiritually our Mother.

But let's notice more from these opening words of 2nd John. For as we glance through the verses 1, 2, 3, and then on to verse 4, what do we see in common between them all? Which thing pops up in all four verses?

Ah, isn't it that word, "truth"? Notice - it's there twice in verse 1: "...whom I love in the truth...", and "...who know the truth..." In verse 2 there's another aspect, "...because of the truth..." From verse 3 we read that God's grace, mercy and peace would be with them "in truth..." And this is followed by "...walking in the truth..." in verse 4.

Then this word - which is in the Greek *aletheia* - simply disappears altogether! You won't find "truth" anywhere else in this letter.

So - was it just an opening formula? Is it used like "Hi!" or "Giddyay!" said in that distinctly 1st Century Mediterranean way? Or is this all part of the apostle John setting the scene for what really is the point of his letter? A letter that, though brief, has obviously been written with some purpose in mind.

And thinking about the purposes of letters, which New Testament letter to a church or churches or believers in general doesn't have some clear reason for writing? Actually, we could phrase that even further - which New Testament doesn't have a real concern for its recipient or recipients in mind? Aren't they just about all written exactly because something isn't quite right amongst the brethren?

So what's not right among the churches that the apostle John himself needs to write these inspired words?

Have a look at 2nd John. If there is one key verse, which is it? Which verse brings home what this is meant for them?

Ah, it would have to have to be the one almost in the middle – verse 8. That's the key concern. [Read it out.]

And now that we've seen this key verse - what does it mean for these opening verses? Especially how does it tie in with the use of the word *aletheia* five times in four verses?

Well, what does the word "truth" suggest to you? Doesn't it draw a line between what is right and what is wrong? To be "in truth" then, or "to know the truth", is about being in the right. What else could that be than being joined to the Lord God by faith in Jesus Christ?

And so we come to the second aspect of this text. Here we see that LEARNING TO DISCERN IS RECOGNISING THE WRONG WAY.

John is drawing a clear distinction - truth either speaks of our relationship to the Lord, or of how we're apart from him. It's the ultimate difference - between those who believe and those who don't believe.

But it also comes to mean a difference not just between those who profess Christ and those who don't, but also to the difference between those living as Christians and those who don't. Notice this distinction in verse 4, "I rejoiced greatly to find **some** of your children walking in the truth..."

It might seem strange to us, but the apostle is rejoicing - he's really thrilled - at seeing only some in the church going the right way! Wouldn't we rather expect an apostle to be pleased only if they were **all** going the right way? Well, at the very least, surely that **most** were going the right way?

But **some**? What could possibly be going on? Why would John be so happy that only a minority are walking with their Lord in faith?

To help us with this we need to go back to reflect on their situation. After all, this letter was written towards the end of the 1st Century. The New Testament churches were already about two generations old - fifty years after Pentecost.

At that beginning, 40 days after Christ's resurrection, it had been tremendous. A great movement of God had brought many to faith, and the

church had grown phenomenally. And it still was growing quickly. But while the church was spreading right throughout the Roman Empire, there had also come along some serious problems.

Actually, this is the way it is with any idea or movement which becomes popular. You get those who join the bandwagon for what they personally can get out of it. They aren't true believers as such, but they're certainly sharp on what it's all about. It can be hard to tell them apart from a genuine follower.

They were those John had written about in his first letter, describing them as those who "went out from us". That means they had once been part of them. Like the many that had left the Lord Jesus at a particular point in his ministry they too had found his Word too hard.

This is why the apostle makes the truth - *aletheia* - so vital. The very teaching and lifestyle which Jesus had, and which turned so many away from him, was still like that. Truth must be there - that's truly knowing and showing the gospel.

This is a "knowing" that's more than an education. It goes beyond the facts and doctrines to accepting the truth and being committed to it. All who come to know the truth this way come into the same bond of love between the apostle and this congregation.

And then we come to a third aspect in this passage. Here we note that **LEARNING TO DISCERN IS GOING THE GREATEST WAY.**

Congregation, if you accept the truth, you love. This is the love which here in the Greek is *agape* love. And where there is none of this love, there you have the clearest sign that the truth hasn't been accepted.

Dear friend, do you accept this truth? Does the greatest news of all live in you? Do you believe it will be yours forever? Are you personally connected to the One who said, "I am ... the truth"? This is this love of the text.

Here is where we must disagree with those who draw a difference between doctrine and life. Perhaps you've had it said to you: "Oh, let's not get doctrinal about this. We're just here to share. Come on - just let the love of Jesus flow through you. And let it come out! Hang it all out!"

There is a thinking today among Christians - in fact it affects many Christians - that doctrine is a dirty word. This is important to note for us. Learning to discern isn't what many believers will hear about in their churches today.

The Bible, however, has quite a different message. It points out that if you are alive in Christ - saved by his blood - you are very doctrinal. You are walking in the truth, after all. And what is "walking in the truth" if it's not living out all that we are in Jesus? That's love!

The picture here is of a path. It is a path along which we walk, by which we keep course, and from which we should never deviate. In fact, to leave this path is to leave the truth. To leave this path in your doctrine or your lifestyle it's never just an unfortunate error, or an accident, but what it really is - deliberate disobedience!

Verse 4 is clear on this. It is "...just as we were commanded by the Father." This is how you love.

Don't think, like so many do, that God has revealed his truth in such a way that it's up to us whether we believe or disbelieve - or whether we obey or disobey. And certainly God the Father is shown here to be completely different than how many believers think about him today. You see, in practice they treat God as an impotent, limited, well-intentioned and sometimes blundering Person who is totally dependent to have his emotional needs met by his creatures who will heal his broken father-heart.

This is the subtle message with today's emphasis on how we feel. This is where we hear allusions about whether a person is "happy" about something or not. It is as though somehow we have to add our vote to the Lord's before anything really happens.

For John then to speak of what the Father commanded us to do is to recognise definitively a God who is in control and who makes us accountable because now we know. And the more we know of his way, the more he expects of us.

Friend, do you know Jesus? If you do, you know it's what you yet need to do! Because you need to know him even more! For while those who don't know him, simply don't care for him, if you do know him, how much more don't you know you need him the more you walk with him?

John wrote about this in his first letter, chapter 1, verse 8 and 9. There he said, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

It's no wonder the apostle is pleased that God is doing this. He knows it by his own inner conviction through the Holy Spirit. That's the truth.

Did it matter how many were in that church? Not at all - the great joy is because the Lord is keeping **his** church! This is his faithful remnant - those called through the ages to be the Lord's chosen and precious.

And so we come to the fourth aspect in this text. Here we see that **LEARNING TO DISCERN IS ALWAYS THE WAY.**

To those believers, the apostle goes on in verse 5. He writes there, "And now I ask you, dear lady - not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning - that we love one another."

This is a polite request. It shows respect for God's people - a people who in this situation had persevered through many difficulties.

Though then we could be surprised by what he kindly requests of them. How simple that he just asks them to love one another. Of course they would be doing that!

We shouldn't assume anything here, however. John is reminding them about what is the most important thing in their lives. This is something so earth-shattering that they certainly couldn't leave it back in the past. It had to be alive in them now.

Perhaps the illustration of a couple who had been married many years helps us here. This couple had come to the sad point of being on the verge of a separation and divorce.

Before this process could be initiated, though, they had to go to a counsellor, to see if he could possibly help them. The counsellor asked them what seemed to be the difficulty. The wife was quite honest, "He never tells me he loves me!" Then the counsellor looked to her spouse for his response. He said, "Look, I told her I loved her on our Wedding Day and nothing's changed since then!"

It might seem such a little thing to ask, "love one another". Yet it always drives us on our knees before the Lord as we know we haven't been loving – whether in thought, word, and action. Love isn't what we sign on a marriage form - it's what we're meant to think and say and do **all the time!** And that's where that husband got it completely wrong!

To those first century believers these few words would have brought back to mind the whole gospel message of the doing and dying of Jesus Christ. This brought to mind the whole flow of salvation history which led up to the central point of the cross. The Jews among them would know that well.

As a second generation Christian church they would have been brought up in this. They had been reminded often enough of the Gospel message.

They also knew those words of the Lord in John 14:16. There he said, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth."

By this time much of the New Testament was written down and known among the churches. What had been passed on through word of mouth was now joined with the Old Testament Scriptures as the Word of God.

Just a generation ago the eye-witnesses had been among them. The apostle John was yet still alive. He was writing to them this truth. And now, to us today, with no eye-witness account, it's all the more vital that **the** eye-witness account be made available to read, study and be convicted by.

In the words of Cornelius van der Waal, "The life of the church isn't to be governed by an emergency arising out of the needs of the hour. The church that lives out of the unchanging truth of the unchanging God knows that it must walk further along the old path of this commandment."

This world shouts out to us, "Get ahead, think of yourself, throw out the old baggage, do what you want!" And yet the truth couldn't be more different! It's in the past that there lies the future's hope. The same old simple gospel message, preaching faithfully, without all those sights that dazzle and the sounds which are so enticing, is the only way.

How can anyone know this way? Well, which way do people come to know the truth of the Bible? Where do they see the Bible alive? It's in us - we're living Bibles!

That's what verse 6 says, when John says, "This is love". Moving on from verse 4 and from where we were, through verse 5 and where we are going, this is now, in verse 6, where we will keep showing.

This is where another word comes to the fore. "Truth" set up the believer's position in the first four verses. "Love" gave the truth its wheels. But what about its steering? Where is its direction?

In this way we come to a fifth aspect. Here we realise that LEARNING TO DISCERN IS THE CLEAR WAY.

During the verses 5, 6 and 7, another word keeps appearing. Can you guess which it is? In fact, it appears four times. Yes, it's "command". In the Greek this is *entolay*.

Though, why "command"? Doesn't that seem rather arbitrary, as though it's like we are in an army being forced to do it? Well, we are in an army - the Lord's Army! The picture of the Christian as a soldier appears often in the New Testament.

There is a difference to this army, however. The rule for this army isn't like the world's armies. The Supreme Commander doesn't lord it over us as other Generals do. Instead, as we read in verse 3, he is "with us in truth and love." The Truth which is what he is. The Love which is living out how he is.

And we can do it! Exactly because he did it! This is the commander who leads from the front and who has already won the decisive battle from the front. In the words of 1st John 5:3-5, "...his commands are not burdensome. For everyone born of God has overcome the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

We cannot separate belief from action. The command, singular, is that we must love one another; and the commands, plural, are the different ways that we show we do love one another.

Deuteronomy chapter 5 gives us an example of these commands working out how the Old Testament church was to love the Lord in the Promised Land. And just as the whole book of Deuteronomy is several extended sermons so every faithful sermon today - the message preached according to the truth - must state that love is the fulfilment of the law.

John is insisting here that loving each other will be shown in obedience to the commands which unfold the nature of love. Forget the airy-fairy "Love, Love, Love" of the 60's. That thinking only brought us the "Why? Why? Why?" of the 90's, and this century it's only becoming more depressing!

That kind of love is only what people personally want. It wasn't really concerned about anyone else, even though in the 60's it seemed people liked being with everyone else. A la Woodstock, Berkeley, Greenwich Village!

All that the 60's brought us, though, was rebellion. Authority was completely undermined. Because of that time we have the fall of the world as we know it today - whether with basic values, manners, easy divorce, and certainly with the rising addictions and suicide rates. Watch the TV and you'll see!

By faith, however, we have the perpetual fountain - the eternal structure. This is not built by human hands but carved out by God the Son on a cursed

cross. There he poured out the love that would create in us all we would ever need!

John had already spelt this out in his first letter. In chapter 4, the verses 9 and 10 there, he had said, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

It couldn't get any more clearer than that, could it? Let's praise God that we can see that. And let's plead with God that he will see it, and see it increasingly – in us!

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O loving Heavenly Father, where can we begin to thank you for the most marvellous gift of your Son? Indeed, we cannot do anything except stand amazed by your grace to us in him.

And help us, by your Spirit, to show how much difference faith in Jesus makes – now and for all eternity!

In his saving Name alone we plea, Amen.