

Series: John's Letters

Title: What It Means to Be A Christian

Text: 2 John 1-3

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Verse 1

Family lineage is important. It determines a lot about a person's nature and identity. Such is true in a physical sense, but it is also true in a spiritual sense. One's lineage in Christ has a great impact on one's trajectory in life. John hinted at these realities in the introductory words of his second letter. He said, "The elder: To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth—and not only I, but also all who know the truth" (2 John 1).

The apostle first identified himself as an "elder." The word was one that referred to a spiritual in the Christ's church (Acts 14:23). It was used interchangeably in the New Testament with the terms for pastor and bishop (Titus 1:5-9, 1 Peter 1:1-5). It depicted the way in which Christ's leaders were to embody and exhibit a certain level of spiritual maturity. Interestingly, John referred to his role as an elder with the definite article, using a word translated "the." His designation indicated that he was a well-known leader within the early church.

Though John was an apostle (Matthew 10:2, Acts 8:14), he had begun to function as an elder within the church. His reference to himself as such revealed that, by the time of his writing, the age of the apostles was fading away and the age in which pastors led the church was beginning to dawn. Such realities were in accordance with Paul's teaching. The Lord used apostles and prophets to establish the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). Afterwards, pastors and teachers carried on the work they had started (Ephesians 4:11-12). Notice how John appealed to his apostolic authority in his introduction to his first letter (1 John 1:1), but he appealed to his pastoral authority in his subsequent two letters (2 John 1 and 3 John 1).

It was as a spiritual leader who was mature in the faith that John wrote "to the elect lady and her children." He was careful to humbly remind his readers of his position as an elder, and of his maturity as a Christ follower. He knew his readers needed a gentle reminder of his experience in the faith. In all generations, the Lord gives spiritual leaders to look over the souls of His people ().

In addressing his readers, he referred to "the elect lady and her children." Who was "the lady" of which John spoke? Were his words a reference to a particular woman amongst his readership? Some think so. There are those who actually believe Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a member of one of the churches in first-century Asia Minor. The claim is made that John's words were a reference to her. It is thought that John's mention of Mary in our text was tied to his commitment to look after Jesus' mother after the death of her son (John 19:26-27).

While such speculation is certainly interesting, it seems John's mention of an "elect lady" had a completely different meaning. The word referenced "lady" seems to have been a figurative description of a church of congregation. Such an interpretation of the term is supported by the fact that John will later speak of the "lady" by using the second person plural pronoun in verse 6. The moniker "lady" was a fitting one for a local assembly. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the church was regarded as the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:27). In keeping with Jewish tradition, God's people are to be regarded as figurative woman who has been espoused to Him (Hosea 2:2-13). All local churches can be regarded as metaphorical ladies. Other local churches can be regarded as sister churches (2 John 13). All in all, John's descriptor of the church as a "lady" or as His "bride" is instructive for us. It reminds us that our Heavenly Father has great love and affection for us and His church. John was the apostle of love (John 13:21-30; 18:15-18; 19:26-27; John 21:7, 20) and he wanted his readers to know they were loved.

He further emphasized the topic of love in verse one by speaking of the love he had for the church. He said, "whom I love in the truth—and not only I, but also all who know the truth."

The original language of the text depicted a continual or ongoing love. For John, Christians were to live with an abiding love for one another. Such was a theme of his first letter. In 1 John 1:10, he said, "The one who loves his brother or sister remains in the light, and there is not cause for stumbling in him." Christian congregations are to be bastions of love. It is important to note, however, that such love is not a worldly type of love. The love of Christ is always in alignment with the truth of Christ. That's why John spoke of the way in which he loved the church "in the truth."

The word rendered "truth" is one that spoke of the realities of God's Word. It is through such truth that God's people are sanctified and built up into all that God wants them to be (John 17:17). Truth is such an internal part of the bride of Christ that Paul called her "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). Since the church has such a relation to truth, the way in which she loves should be marked by truth. John knew that his readers faced temptations to embrace a phony and feigned form of love. He wanted them to pursue the type of love that was based on the realities of God's Word. The gospel and the teaching of the possible established the parameters for the nature of Christian love. Such clarification concerning truth was important, considering the false teaching of the Gnostics. It is for this reason that John similarly espoused the importance of truth and love in his first letter, saying, "Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth" (1 John 3:18).

John's words upheld the importance of both love and truth amongst the early church. Generations later, believers are still bound by the same teaching. Christians are one's who have "known the truth." Through the realities of the gospel, they have been spiritually transformed and set free from the penalty of sin (John 8:32). An otherworldly love for God and His people should mark their lives (Matthew 22:37-40). Though the world may deal in deception, manipulation, and grudge-bearing, Christians are to be different. The Holy Spirit of God within them should produce a sanctified charity within their lives (Galatians 5:22).

Verse 2

John continued to talk about the topic of truth in verse 2, saying, "because of the truth that remains in us and will be with us forever" (2 John 2). The Greek word rendered "truth" is one that spoke of the Lord's fixed and divine realities. The concept could be regarded as the real state of affairs in life, what is real on the basis of who God is. One has said truth "refers to the divine reality and signifies what is ultimately real; namely, God Himself. Hence, it can refer to the expression of God in His incarnate Son and in the Christian message."¹ Such a definition makes sense, since the New Testament regards Jesus as being synonymous with the truth of God (John 14:6).

According to John, the truth of Jesus "remains in us" who are believers. His words were a clear reference to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. In his first letter, the apostle spoke often about the Spirit's work in the lives of God's children (1 John 2:20, 27; 3:9; 4:4-6; 5:1). His interest in the subject was likely related to the fact that he had personally heard Jesus teach on it. In his gospel account, he gave great attention to our Lord's explanation on the role of the indwelling Spirit (John 14:15-21, 15:26-16:13). John wanted Christians to understand that the Holy Spirit indwells believers at regeneration (John 3:3). With His presence, the Holy Spirit brings a special manifestation of God's truth. Jesus told His first disciples, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears. He will also declare to you what is to come" (John 16:13).

The indwelling presence of the Spirit and the accompanying truth He gives are both permanent and irrevocable things. John said the Holy Spirit "remains in us and will be with us forever." He used present active participles in order to emphasize the permanent presence of

¹ Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 600.

truth in the lives of Christians.² The apostle's teaching was in alignment with that of Paul's. In Ephesians, Paul spoke of the Holy Spirit by saying, "In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed. The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of the possession, to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:13-14). If you are in Christ, you can have confidence that Christ's Spirit and Christ's truth "will never leave you or abandon you" (Hebrews 13:5). You can "boldly say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:6). No matter what happens in life, you always have the Holy Spirit and His truth to guide you. Such realities are in accordance with Jesus' promise from the Great Commission wherein He said, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Verse 3

In 2 John 3, John greeted his readers by saying, "Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love." His list of blessings at the outset of his letter was prototypical for a first-century epistle. Pay special attention to his mention of "grace, mercy, and peace." The triad of virtues are intended to be the common experience of every Christian. It is for this reason that the three virtues are so often mentioned in the salutations of New Testament epistles (Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:3, 2 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:2, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:2, 1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 1:2, Titus 1:4, Philemon 1:3, 1 Peter 1:2, 2 Peter 1:2).

Grace is God's unmerited favor toward His people. It is his kindness that leads to salvation (Ephesians 2:8), promotes sanctification (2 Peter 3:18), and provides sufficiency in all things (1 Corinthians 15:10). Grace can be defined as the act of the Lord giving Christians what they don't deserve.

Mercy is the Lord's compassionate pity toward His people. It is involved in providing salvation and saving us from the deception, depravity, and death associated with sin (Ephesians 2:4 and Titus 3:5). Mercy can be defined as the act of the Lord not giving us what we deserve.

Peace is the experience of inner-tranquility that God gives to His children. The New Testament conception of the virtue was related to the Hebrew vision of shalom. It emphasized "wholeness and well-being of life in all its aspects."³ Gospel peace brings a sense of rest and harmony to the human soul. Such rest is obtained positionally at salvation (Romans 5:1), and it is experienced practically through one's reliance on Christ in sanctification (Philippians 4:6-9). Peace can be defined as the Lord giving us what we need.

John's sequential arrangement of the three virtues of grace, mercy, and peace was significant. Grace always comes first in the life of a believer. Mercy and peace follow. One has rightly remarked that grace "is the wellspring of love in the heart of God, mercy its display, and peace is its result."⁴

In the second half of verse 3, John depicted the source of his aforementioned virtues. The Christian experiences such blessings "from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father." The title "Father" depicted the Lord as a loving God who desires relational intimacy with His children (Matthew 6:9). The reference to "Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father" was a clear reference to trinitarian doctrine. It emphasized the deity of Jesus. In fact, John was intentional to put God and Jesus on the same level through his use of the conjunction

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 600.

³ Aiken, Daniel L. *The New American Commentary, Volume 38: 1, 2, 3 John*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001) 222.

⁴ Aiken, 222.

“and.” Such emphasis was needed, considering the way in which the Gnostics diminished the nature of Christ. Real grace, mercy, and peace in life were to be found in God the Father and His divine Son, not the mystical doctrines of the heretics in Asia Minor. It is a faith in the Lord and His Son that opens the door to all of the blessings of God.

John further qualified the means of experiencing grace, mercy, and peace at the end of verse 3 by making mention of “truth and love.” The two terms highlighted the two most pressing issues amongst John’s readership. John was strategic in speaking about “truth and love” in his epistle (2 John 6, 10), because unloving false teachers were promoting error. He wanted his readers to realize that “truth and love” are an indispensable part of the Christian experience. The real Christian life is grounded in the objective truth of God’s Word and it results in the manifestation of love (Matthew 22:37-40).