

Series: John's Letters

Title: Steering Clear of Spiritual Error

Text: 2 John 7-13

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Verse 7

In verse 7, John transitioned to talk to his readers about erroneous teaching that was having a negative impact on churches in the region. He said, "Many deceivers have gone out into the world; they do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist." In the original language of the text, verse 7 began with a conjunction that could have been translated as "because."¹ John's intent was to link his new discussion on false teaching with his previous discussion on Christian love (2 John 6). In order to love God and others correctly, and thus fulfill the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40), one must be diligent in regard to Christian doctrine. What one believes about God and Jesus is important. Right beliefs about God will build one up in a right relationship with God. One has said, "Doctrine — truth — is the basis for practical living. What we believe precedes what we do."²

John warned his readers regarding the raging storm of false teaching by making mention of "deceivers." He used similar language in 1 John 1:8 to speak of the way in which the Gnostic heretics deceived themselves through their own deceptive doctrines. The original language of the text used a word that commonly referred to a vagabond or tramp in the first century. It depicted a corrupt and treacherous person.³ In the context of matters related to religion and spirituality, it referred to one who misled others into accepting wrong opinions and embracing wrong actions.⁴ John also used the word in 1 John 2:26 and 27 to speak of the false teachers in Asia Minor.⁵ In our current text, he used it again to give a stern warning concerning the presence of false teaching.

He depicted the heretics of Asia Minor as having "gone out into the world." The word rendered "world" was a key word in John's writings. He used it famously in 1 John 2:16 to speak of the three-fold value system Satan uses to distract people from the Lord. In the context of our current passage, it seems John alluded to some sort of great disturbance that had taken place within the first century church. It seems a great number of false teachers had made a grand exit from the local gatherings of believers.⁶ It is not insignificant that the language of our text is similar to that found in 1 John 2:19, a passage that also spoke of the way in which some had left the church. Perhaps John's first letter had emboldened the genuine believers to stand up to the heretics. Realizing they did not have a platform for propagating their perverted precepts, many of the false teachers had left the church and committed themselves to pursuing the ways of the world.

¹ Walvoord and Zuck, 907.

² Hamilton, Ian. ed. *The Banner of Truth Magazine, August & September 2019*, 671-2. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust), 11.

³ Earle, Ralph. *Beacon Bible Commentary: Volume VII*. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1965), 409.

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 600.

⁵ Ross, 230.

⁶ Robertson, 252-253.

Despite their departure, John still wanted the church to be on guard. Real believers needed to be discerning concerning those who did “not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.” The apostle’s intent was to counteract a specific doctrine of the heretics in Asia Minor that denied the incarnation of Jesus. The focus was not on Jesus’ second coming. It was on his first. In John’s first letter, he dealt with the same issue in 1 John 4:2-3. He revisited the subject in our current text in order to encourage his readers to continue to be on guard.

The Gnostics actively taught that Jesus did not really appear in the flesh at His first coming. They denied the incarnation, claiming Jesus did not inhabit a real physical body.⁷ John consistently combatted such error. The first words of his first epistle served the purpose of reminding his readers that Jesus had real flesh, flesh that people could see and touch (1 John 1:1). Doctrine concerning Jesus’ flesh was integral to the Christian faith. If it was not for the Incarnation, humanity would have no hope of salvation from sin and death. The author of Hebrews explained the necessity of Jesus living in a human body on our behalf in Hebrews 10:5-10. In Colossians 2:9, Paul upheld the importance of the incarnation by saying, “For the entire fullness of God’s nature dwells bodily in Christ.”

Interestingly, John’s language in 2 John 7 used a middle voice participle in the present tense to speak of “the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.”⁸ The intent was to speak of the incarnation as having abiding effects.⁹ For John’s readers, the doctrine was not one of secondary or tertiary concern. It had real, life-altering implications on Christian belief and practice. It is for this reason that the authors of the New Testament often upheld the doctrine as being of chief importance (Philippians 2:6-8; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; Hebrews 13:10-14).

For John, anyone who disagreed or diverted from his apostolic teaching was a “deceiver and the antichrist.” The word “deceiver” was used at the beginning of the verse. It’s double appearance in our text gave emphasis to the danger of false teaching. The title “antichrist” literally meant “against Christ.” The apostle used the label in his first letter in 1 John 2:18. It is important to take note of the lowercase letter at the beginning of the moniker. John did not mean to make reference to the official Antichrist, a figure who will seem to dominate the scene of human history at the end of time (Revelation 13:11-18). Instead, his focus was on individuals who were practically “against Christ” through their propagation of gospel-less doctrine that minimized the person and work of Christ. Believers of all generations should be on guard against any spiritual or even “Christian” teaching that doesn’t place adequate weight on the life and sacrifice of Jesus. One has rightly commented, “What one believes about Jesus will impact other areas of his theology. Indeed it will shape his entire worldview.”¹⁰

Verse 8

In verse 8, John lengthened his appeal regarding false teaching by saying, “Watch yourselves so that you don’t lose what we have worked for, but that you may receive a full reward” (2 John 8). In the original language of the text, the first verb employed a reflexive pronoun. John’s intent was to encourage his readers to perform an action on themselves. They had a personal responsibility to look out for their own spiritual well being. Jesus used a similar grammatical construction in Mark 13:9 to warn against false teaching.¹¹ Throughout the New Testament, we

⁷ Walvoord and Zuck, 907.

⁸ Robertson, 253.

⁹ Akin, 229.

¹⁰ Akin, 230.

¹¹ Robertson, 253.

see the same language from our text used to warn believers of the need to be on guard against erroneous Christian teaching (Matthew 24:4; Colossians 2:8; Hebrews 2:1, 3:12). In our current text, the language utilized a present active imperative verb, calling for a constant watchfulness on behalf of truth.¹²

To encourage watchfulness, John reminded his readers that they had something to “lose.” Some mistakingly believe that the apostle’s warning was in reference to salvation. The New Testament is clear that salvation is an irreversible process (John 6:37; Ephesians 1:13-14; Romans 8:30). The use of the words “worked for” in our text are instructive. They were used by Paul in Romans 4:4-5 to tell us that salvation cannot be earned by good works. The language of our verse also appears in other parts of the New Testament to speak of the good works associated with Christian sanctification and service (Mark 14:6; John 9:4; Galatians 6:10; Colossians 3:23; 3 John 5). John’s words were meant to convey the idea that erroneous beliefs about Jesus would result in inferior advances in Christian sanctification and service. As a result, such bad beliefs would inadvertently cause a Christian to forsake future rewards for faithful Christian living.

There is a lot we do not know about the hereafter and the final judgment. This side of eternity, we cannot know all there is to know about the Lord’s system of rewards for believers. However, we do know that there are eternal rewards that await God’s children. Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 12:36-37 and 25:14-30 reveal such to be true. Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 did as well.

John’s language in our current text employed a term translated “worked for” that was used in the ancient world to speak of the daily wages of a workman.¹³ The apostle used the word as a metaphor for the rewards for Christian service that will be distributed at the end of time. Paul used it similarly in 1 Corinthians 3:8, saying, “Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.” He also used it again when he said, “...each one’s work will become obvious. For the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire; the fire will test the quality of each one’s work. If anyone’s work that he has built survives, he will receive a reward” (1 Corinthians 3:13-14). When manmade philosophies beckon believers to divert from the simplicity of Christ, they should call to mind the promise of future rewards. Corrupt beliefs will lead to compromise in Christian sanctification and service. In the end, such compromise will cut one off from eternal reward.

Verse 9

Verse 9 provided a gauntlet to separate the real Christians from the false professors. John said, “Anyone who does not remain in Christ’s teaching but goes beyond it does not have God. The one who remains in that teaching, this one has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9). The word “remain” was a famous one in John’s writings. It was used in John 15:4-5 to speak of a fundamental experience of the Christian life. It depicted an abiding and personal connection to Jesus. In our current verse, John’s use of the word indicated that an adherence to the “teaching” of Christ was and is an integral part of remaining in Jesus. For the apostle, a robust spiritual life involved both the subjective aspect of remaining as well as the objective aspect of teaching. Those who sacrificed doctrine on the altar of experience did not have a sound relationship with Jesus.

John was concerned about those who went “beyond” the teaching of Christ. The verb translated “goes beyond” in verse 9 is one that meant “to run ahead.” It spoke of one who was

¹² Akin 231.

¹³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 600.

too progressive, of “anyone who runs ahead.”¹⁴ It meant “to go too far.”¹⁵ Ironically, the term was a cherished technical term of the Gnostic heretics. They liked to use it to boast of the supposed cutting-edge nature of their belief system. John undoubtedly used the word intentionally to expose the error of the heretics. Some believe there is a tone of sarcasm in the text.¹⁶ One has said John’s words were “a sharp dart” aimed at his opponents.¹⁷ Though the Gnostics boasted of being advanced in spiritual matters, they had actually crossed the line. Their system of belief was false and erroneous.

It is worth noting that a certain type of progression is profitable in the Christian life. The New Testament actually mandates that we move beyond the rudimentary principles of the gospel (Hebrews 6:1). The church actually exists to build up the body of Christ to a more advanced standing in the faith (Ephesians 4:11-13). Christians are called to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Growth and progression in faith are good things, but they become bad when they have the wrong focus. Christians should seek to grow in relation to things that may be new to them, but they should never aim to grow in relation to things that are new to Scripture. Such was the problem in Asia Minor. The heretics were not encouraging people to grow “in” Christ; they were encouraging people to grow “beyond” Christ. Believers of all generations should be careful that their growth is in the faith. Many have become shipwrecked because of the ways in which they progressed beyond the bounds of Scripture.

For John, the ones who progressed beyond the bounds of the orthodox faith were ones who did “not have God.” The apostle’s words may have seemed stout, but they were necessary. Those who denied the incarnation were not regenerate. They did not know God and they did not know what they were talking about. The apostle wanted his readers to be strong and healthy, so he made unequivocal statements about Jesus and God’s truth. He followed in the footsteps of Jesus, one who similarly made strong truth claims about His nature and the nature of God’s gospel truth (John 8:58-59, 14:6).

Pay careful attention to the last few words of verse 9. Notice how John said “this one has both the Father and the Son.” As he did in 1 John 4:2-3, 10, 14-15, John was strategic in linking Jesus and the Heavenly Father together. His words elevated the divine nature of Jesus. Contrary to the twisted teachings of the Gnostics, Jesus was not a mere phantom who emanated from a mystical angelic realm to share enlightened teaching with humankind. He was the Son of God, an equal with God, and a part of the eternal Triune Godhead. Gnostic teaching that diminished the person of Jesus was false.

Notice also how John spoke of the way in which true believers have a personal relationship with both God and Jesus. His use of the word “has” was significant. It depicted an ongoing and continual possession. The language of the text evoked beautiful imagery. Those who persisted in the plain and simple truth of Jesus had the joy of experiencing an abiding and ever-present relationship with the God of the Universe and His Son, Jesus Christ. Though the Gnostics tried to make the real believers think they needed something more, the real believers indeed had all they needed. They had God Himself in their hearts!

Verse 10

¹⁴ Earle, 410.

¹⁵ Akin, 231.

¹⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 600.

¹⁷ Ross, 231.

In verse 10, John gave a strong warning for his readers. He said, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your home, and do not greet him" (2 John 10). The word translated "bring" was one that was used for traveling baggage or luggage in the first century.¹⁸ It seems the apostle intended to make a startling reference to the potential of traveling preachers and teachers who might have brought a new, unchristian form of teaching into the church. In the first century, there was a cultural custom in which religious adherents provided accommodations for traveling preachers and teachers. Evidence of such a practice is found in Acts 18:27.¹⁹ Though many of the heretics had left the churches of Asia Minor at the time of John's writing (1 John 2:19; 2 John 7), there was always the possibility that more would come. John wanted his readers to be on guard.

The word rendered "this" that was affixed to the word "teaching" was significant. John used it to point to a specific form of teaching. His intent was to expose the localized problem in Asia Minor. There were a plethora of false preachers peddling the Gnostic doctrine that denied the humanity of Jesus. Local congregations needed to be vigilant to reject any traveling teacher who denied the witness the apostles had given concerning the "flesh" of Jesus (2 John 7) and the truth of "Christ's teaching" (2 John 9).

The remedy for traveling heretics was simple in John's mind. He told his readers to "not receive" such people into their homes. It is important to note that early churches most commonly met in homes.²⁰ The word translated "receive" in verse 9 is one that meant "to show hospitality."²¹ John's intent was not to prohibit simple conversation with unbelievers, nor did he forbid prolonged interactions with those who weren't saved. His warning was against allowing false teachers to have fellowship and places of prominence in local churches.

In the original language of the text, John used a present imperative verb. The verbiage prohibited an action in progress.²² Though the majority of the false teachers had departed the churches of Asia Minor (1 John 2:19; 2 John 9), it seems that some churches were still providing a platform to traveling teachers who didn't adhere to the orthodox faith.

John's words bring to mind two applications for model believers. First, the church should always stand on guard against allowing space for teachers and leaders who deviate from the simplicity of Christ and Scripture. Some would maintain that such caution is unloving. The opposite is actually true. It is both dangerous and unloving to allow unorthodox teachers to assert themselves in the church, since their doctrines could potentially lead to the spiritual demise of God's people. When error is propagated and allowed, innocent bystanders become victims of Satan's schemes. They are cut off from the soul-liberating truth of Christ that brings freedom and forgiveness.

Second, John's words instruct us regarding what we should exactly be on guard against. The apostle's concern was with flagrant gospel error. He did not mean to say that believers should cut themselves off from others because of minuscule differences in relation to secondary or tertiary matters of the faith, nor did he give license for division and separation over cultural, social, or political perspectives. Remember, John was dealing with a form of false teaching that denied the incarnation of Christ. He was refuting a false teaching that struck at the foundation of the gospel message. The apostle's words should never be used by modern believers to erect

¹⁸ Walvoord, 908.

¹⁹ Robertson, 255.

²⁰ Robertson, 255.

²¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 601.

²² Akin, 233.

walls of division and to foster a spirit of sectarian antagonism within the church. Twenty-first century Christians should stand on guard against false doctrine in the church, but they should be unwilling to break fellowship with other believers over matters that aren't critical to gospel truth. One has rightly said John's instruction "...cannot be rightly used as authorization for rejecting everyone who does not agree with us. On the other hand, neither should we so localize it that we condone an easy tolerance."²³

Verse 10 closed with the command "do not greet him." The language of the text referred to a customary friendly salutation, the equivalent of our "Hi, how are you?" One has said John's words could have referred to a greeting that said something like "I'm glad to see you" or "I wish you well."²⁴ John seems to have prohibited even a friendly greeting of visiting false teachers. His words may seem harsh to many modern readers. The spirit of tolerance in the West has rendered many believers spiritually weak and undiscerning. One commentator has provided the following helpful application:

To some modern minds these instructions seem unduly rigid and harsh. A great part of the problem, however, lies in the modern inclination to be highly tolerant of religious differences. One must frankly face the fact that the New Testament writers did not share this spirit of toleration. Their commitment to the truth and their consciousness of the dangers of religious error called forth many stern denunciations of false teachers. Not surprisingly, this modern age, having a diminishing sense of the dangers of heresy, has lost its convictions about the truth.²⁵

Verse 11

John continued his warning about fellowship with false teachers by saying, "for the one who greets him shares in his evil works" (2 John 11). The word "greet" is a translation of the same Greek word that was used in verse 10. Ancient greetings often involved an invocation of the name of God. Passing travelers or shoppers in a market customarily said seeing akin to your modern "God bless you."²⁶ John wanted his reader to avoid using such customary greetings with false teachers so that they might not give credence, affirmation, or support to heretical doctrines.

The apostle warned that using such a greeting with a false teacher might lead one to participate in "evil works." The word translated "shares" was an important one in the early church. It was often used to speak of the fellowship of the early gathering of believers (Acts 2:42). John wanted his readers to be aware that a customary greeting of "God bless you" could lead to more intimate fellowship. In the end, such interaction could lead to compromise in regard to the message and ministry of Christ. The church needed to be on guard. John's warning was in alignment with Paul's instruction to the church at Ephesus: "Don't participate in the fruitless works of darkness, but instead expose them" (Ephesians 5:11).

Verse 12

John turned toward his conclusion of his letter by saying, "Though I have many things to write to you, I don't want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to come to you and talk face to face so that our joy may be complete" (2 John 12). The apostle realized his letter was brief. He wanted

²³ Earle, 410.

²⁴ Walvoord and Zuck, 909.

²⁵ Walvoord and Zuck, 909.

²⁶ AKin, 233.

to say more, but he needed to conclude. Indeed, the doctrine and life of Christ left plenty to be said. The apostle could have never shared all he had to share. Thus, his conclusion to his second letter was similar to his conclusion of his gospel (John 21:25).

Instead of writing more, John chose to visit his readers personally. He said, "I don't want to use paper and ink." The word rendered "paper" in the Greek was the word from we get our English word for "chart." It referred to the leaves of papyrus that were often fashioned in strips and pasted together in order to make ancient writing material.²⁷ John's reference to this material, along with his mention of "ink" gave evidence that he wrote his epistles with his own hands.²⁸ He wanted his readers to know that he had a loving concern for their spiritual health. He did not entrust his writing to a scribe because he felt a compulsion to personally address them.

John's love for his readership was also evidenced by his desire to go to them. He said, "I hope to come to you." In writing his letter, John shared the same concern as Paul (2 Corinthians 10:1-2). Many in the churches of Asia Minor would undoubtedly accuse him of being a bit harsh. He knew that a personal visit would help edify and encourage his readers.

Consequently, John desired a "face to face" visit. The original language for the text used terminology that literally meant "mouth to mouth."²⁹ The expression was an ancient figure of speech that depicted close and intimate fellowship between two parties. For John, a mere letter was not enough to express his love and concern for the churches of Asia Minor. He wanted to see them personally. He longed for Christian companionship and connection. Meaningful fellowship would go a long way in deterring the impact of the Gnostic heresy.

All in all, John's desire to see his readers was tied to his desire for the experience of Christian joy amongst God's people. He expressed his intended purpose in visiting them by saying, "so that our joy may be complete." The apostle's words call to mind his words from 1 John 1:4. The man lived with a drive and desire for other people to experience the joy that Christ produces. All of the strong words he shared about false teaching were motivated by a passion to liberate people from error that enslaved.

The word rendered "complete" in our current verse appeared as a perfect passive participle. As a result, it depicted a past action that had abiding results. Furthermore, it conveyed a full measure of joy being poured out on a person, or a group of people, by another.³⁰ John meant to portray the reality that Christ alone can give true joy in life. When Christ does give joy, He gives it in a permanent and life-altering way. The apostle wanted to make sure his readers had the experience of such joy, so he planned to travel to see them personally.

Verse 13

John closed his letter by sending greetings. He said, "The children of your elect sister send you greetings" (2 John 13). The term "elect" appeared back in verse 1. John used it as an adjective to depict the blessed standing of God's people. It placed emphasis on the love of God toward His people. The Lord regards His saints as choice and select when compared to the rest of humanity.

The title "sister" referred to the congregation from which John wrote. Since the church is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27), it is fitting to speak of congregations with feminine pronouns. All churches are proverbial ladies who have fellowship with other proverbial ladies (2 John 1). It is for this reason that it is fitting to speak of separate congregations as being "sister

²⁷ Robertson, 255.

²⁸ Robertson, 255.

²⁹ Robertson, 255.

³⁰ Akin, 234.

churches.”³¹ John’s letter was likely circulated amongst several gatherings of believers that enjoyed some sort of fellowship with one another.

The designation “children” surely referred to the true believers within the church form which John wrote. Since all of God’s people are considered God’s children (1 John 3:1), the term was a fitting moniker for John’s fellow believers. The title is loaded with connotations of God’s love and the new standing we have in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-6). In light of the corruption and deception in the church culture around them, John’s readers needed to take a strong stand in their position as God’s “children.”

³¹ Walvoord and Zuck, 909.