

A Healthy Family

A study of the apostle John's second letter

The second letter of John is the only apostolic letter addressed to a woman, "To the chosen lady and her children" (v.1). Some commentators suggest that John is using symbolic language, so that this "lady and her children" is a reference to a local church, and that when he says in closing, "The children of your chosen sister send their greetings" (v.13), he is referring to another local church. The useful and practical instructions contained in this short letter are relevant to the individual and also to the local church, but there is no reason why this letter should not be understood as words of encouragement and caution to a family, perhaps even a single parent family.

There are three words that are repeated 4 or 5 times in the first 6 verses of this letter. These words are "love," "truth" and "commandments." Repetition is used to highlight important ideas. For the apostle John, truth was important, just as important as love. Genuine Christianity needs both. But what truth does John have in mind? In his gospel, John quotes our Lord Jesus as saying "I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jn. 14:6). Here truth refers to a person: Jesus. But John also quotes Jesus as saying, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (Jn 17:17). Here truth refers to God's words. Perhaps John had both meanings in mind when he wrote, "the truth, which lives in us and will be with us for ever" (v.2).

1. A healthy family knows God's truth (Verses 1-3)

What is the connection between this "chosen lady and her children" and "truth"? We notice that the apostle John, this family and many others had *knowledge* of the truth (v.1). In a world where everything seems to be relative, where tolerance encourages everyone to be satisfied with "their own truth," it is good to be reminded that the Lord Jesus and God's Word are objective truth, they remain what they are regardless of our thoughts and interpretations. Truth can be known. Healthy families actively encourage the knowledge of God and of God's Word. It is good and helpful to read

the Scriptures and pray together as a family, at a level and in a way that is meaningful to the children. We thank the Lord for Godly and devoted Sunday School teachers and Christian youth workers. It is good to benefit from their services, but we cannot delegate our responsibility as parents to guide our family in the knowledge of God's truth.

As parents, we need to be creative in finding ways to expose our families to God's truth, encouraging participation in the local church, Christian youth camps, Bible conferences and seminars, Scripture-based music, films and books. Let's not forget that the current of this world is strong and not favorable to Christian families! Notice that the knowledge of truth, according to John, is not something dry and academic. It leads to love (v.1). Grace, mercy and peace are to be expressed in the context of truth and love (v.3). As we get to know our Lord Jesus better, as we grow in our understanding of God's Word, the way we see and treat other people will change. Knowledge of truth leads not only to love, but also to expressions of grace and mercy, and these will contribute towards peace. Real knowledge of God's truth transforms relationships.

2. A healthy family lives God's truth (Verses 4-6)

When the apostle John wrote this letter, he was an old man. He had lived the first few decades of the Christian church. He was a witness of its happy and exciting expansion, but also of its serious difficulties. Not all followed the Lord with sincere hearts. Not all were willing to pay the price of true discipleship. Not all lived the truth they claimed to believe. By the time John wrote this letter, he was an experienced realist. What brought "great joy" to the heart of this old man? Was it news of improved statistics on church attendance? or that larger sums of money were collected for social needs in Judea? No! John tells the lady, "It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us" (v.4). What makes you happy as you look at your children or at the youth in your local church? Are they learning to obey God's Word, to "walk in the truth"?

In the minds of many, love and obedience are seen as opposites. Some associate commands and authority with legalism, and prefer a more flexible and joyful Christianity characterized by love, spontaneity and freedom, a Christianity where we can "be ourselves" without boundaries. But there is no evidence of this tension or dichotomy in the writings of the apostle John. Submission to God's authority, obedience to God's commandments, and love, mix naturally and happily. Like sensible traffic rules lead to safe and free movement, so God's rules provide the framework for joy, spontaneity and freedom. Paradoxically, when we submit to God, we can truly "be ourselves." We express our love for God, not only through prayer and song, but through our obedience to His Word. "And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands" (v.6).

Perhaps due to abuses of authority in the past, the modern mind has been educated to dislike it, question it, fight it and where possible reject it. "No one should tell you what you should believe or do." But at conversion, we have freely given ourselves to

the Lord Jesus. He has bought us. We now belong to Him. We are under His authority – and happy to be there. Once we understand what the Lord wants, obedience should be the natural next step. And the Lord expects this obedience from young and old alike.

3. A healthy family protects God's truth (Verses 7-13)

In the second half of this letter, the apostle John foresees problems. He wishes to warn this lady and her children to be careful, to be realistic, to open their eyes, to protect their home. Their faith, like ours today, is exposed to serious dangers.

(a) We can lose things: “Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully” (v.8). We cannot work for our salvation; it is a gift from God. Neither can we lose our salvation; it remains a gift from God. But we as Christians can lose many things. Through gossip or bitterness we can lose trust and good relationships. By carelessness, a local church can lose good Bible knowledge and practice. By worldliness and laziness we can lose effectiveness in ministry. By disobedience we can lose some of God's intended blessings and eternal rewards.

(b) We can go beyond: “Anyone who runs ahead...” (v.9). This is not a danger for the lazy but for the curious, the active, the progressive, the creative. If not careful, our enthusiasm can lead us beyond the boundaries of revealed truth. Those who transgress are progressing in the wrong direction. It is false progress since it deviates from the Word of God.

(c) We can encourage what is wrong: “Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work” (v.11). The apostle John warned this family that evil would soon knock on their front door. Don't leave the doors open. Look carefully. Learn when to say “no,” politely but firmly. Only receive that which is constructive to the spiritual health of your family. By welcoming what is wrong, we encourage decadence. Who and what do we welcome in our homes? Are we aware of the powerful influence bad friends can have on our spiritual life and that of our children? What TV channels, videos, music, websites, computer games and magazines do we welcome into our home? Is there something, an influence or a person, that you should no longer welcome in your home? Is there something that should be cut off, stopped, discontinued or rejected? Christian homes, if they are to breathe God's peace and harmony, if they are to remain healthy, will need to be radical in protecting their doors.

Conclusion

God loves and cares for families. If Christian families are to be units that foster healthy growth, they should welcome the Lord Jesus in their midst and seek creative ways to encourage each member of the family to know and obey the Word of God. Is there anything you can start doing to motivate your family to know the truth better and to walk in that truth? Knowing that the current of a Godless society is strong and opposite to healthy Christian values, we should be very careful what we welcome into our homes. May the Lord grant us, parents and children alike, the strength to be purposeful and radical in our family life, that the Lord Jesus may feel comfortable in our recreation and celebrations, and also in our daily routines. That is a healthy Christian family.

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