



2 John
Five Guys: The Authors Are Wise
“Truth, Love, and Discernment”

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As many of you have heard me mention before, after I graduated from the UW, I moved to Sun Valley, Idaho to be a ski bum for a season that ended up being two. Admittedly, it was not a great use of my undergrad degree, but I did meet Gwen there, so I’d say it worked out pretty well. You can ask her yourself to see if she agrees 😊. After I was there maybe half of a year, I wanted to develop my faith more. So, I decided to read the New Testament. This was a daunting task to me, so to help make it easy to start with, I chose to start with the shortest book and progress through to the longest. Now, I don’t recommend reading the NT this way, but it does have its advantages. For instance, you can read the shortest five NT books in about 20 minutes, total. There are 26 NT books; do the math and you can read almost 20% of the NT in 20 minutes, which sounds really impressive 😊.

Well, today we begin a new series of messages looking at those five shortest letters. I’ve titled the series “Five Guys” with the subheading of – not, “Burgers and Fries,” but – “The authors are wise.” You may recall this past fall we looked at the letter known as 1st John. So, this is kind of picking up where that left off, as today we look at 2nd John, then 3rd John, then Jude, and then two letters from the apostle Paul: Titus, and Philemon.

Now, the series is titled “Five Guys” for creative cultural connection. And if you have never eaten at Five Guys, do yourself a favor and eat there some time during this series. You can thank me afterwards. I wish I could say that they were sponsoring this series and you can get a discount if you mention our church, or that we’d have free burgers and fries for everyone on one of these Sundays...but that’s not likely. Also, I do need to clarify that these five letters are actually written by *three* guys, because Titus and Philemon were written by Paul, and 2nd and 3rd John were both written by...John. So, instead of thinking that pastor Brian can’t do 1st grade math, think of it as five books of the Bible personified.

So, we’ll start with 2nd John. This letter, and 3rd John, were both written by the same guy who wrote 1st John, who also wrote the Gospel According to

John, and almost certainly wrote Revelation as well. This is John, the disciple of Jesus. This makes John the 3rd most prolific writer of the New Testament, after Luke – (who wrote the Gospel According to Luke and Acts) – and Paul, the author of a number of letters in the NT. As you’ll see in a moment, John doesn’t name himself here, but calls himself, “the elder” right at the start of the letter, in traditional letter formatting for their time and culture. “Elder” is his title, and perhaps representative of his age, and the recipient of the letter would understand who this is.

2nd John is written to a lady, as we’ll see. Some interpret “lady” as metaphorical for a church – that it’s a letter written to a church. There is some merit to the theory, but the straight-forward reading is it’s to a woman, and I think it probably was to an actual lady; probably someone influential and helping to lead or host a church in her home. And in this letter are some distinct themes that are crucial to living as disciples of Jesus in their day, and in ours. So, let’s dive into **2nd John**. This is God’s word to you and me today...

Sermon series graphic. There are three main themes that John emphasizes here, making this a classic “three points and a prayer” sermon. The first theme is “truth.” The word in each instance is the same: “Aletheia.” **“Aletheia” is the regular Greek word for “truth.” We see this word throughout the New Testament: all four Gospels, Paul’s letters, John’s writings, and more.** And what we see with its use is that truth matters. There is an *objective* truth about Jesus that is true regardless of circumstance or situation. The other kind of “truth” that we might speak of, and is more and more common in today’s world than in previous generations, is a truth that is true for one person, but something different can be true for someone else. This is subjective truth. For instance, I might say that onions taste terrible and should never be on pizza, burgers, salads or anything else. To me, that’s true. Most of you in this room probably disagree with that, and so for you it’s true that onions are good and you like them on pretty much everything from pizza to pancakes.

That’s a kind of personal truth, a subjective truth, where the two truths can co-exist, even if the fact is, if we’re all honest, you’d realize that my truth is

superior to your truth. 😊 The point is: in subjective truth, the truth of a statement is subject to each person's perception of what is true. **But in Scripture, the truth being spoken of is not subjective truth. Like gravity: It's presented as *objective* truth. Objective truth is something that's true regardless of personal preferences, experiences, circumstances, and so forth.**

And in the first four verses, this "truth" is mentioned 5 times. So, this is important. John is emphasizing truth. Now, he doesn't define what he means by "truth;" it's presumed that the lady to whom he writes knows; and we know from the rest of the New Testament what is meant by it. And what's meant is the truth of Jesus Christ: his life, his teaching, his death, and his resurrection. We could simply summarize it as "The Gospel of Jesus" – The "good news" of Jesus is the truth. **On multiple occasions, Jesus aligns himself with truth – most famously when he says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).** At its simplest, that's the Biblical definition of *aletheia*: Jesus. That's what is referred to. This is why John writes in verse 2 that this truth "lives in us and will be with us forever." It's a reminder that Jesus isn't dead and buried in a tomb, but that he rose from the grave, and his Spirit now dwells in those who put their trust in him, and that through faith in Jesus we have eternal life.

Now, truth on its own can be cold and harsh. I'm going to turn to Taylor Swift for an example – I promise that sometime after next Sunday's Swiftie Bowl, I mean Super Bowl 😊, ...wow, did I just say that? 😊which we all realize is being played in her honor this year – I promise I'll back off from her lyrics in sermons. But she has this great line in one of her songs (*All Too Well*) where she sings, "You call me up again just to break me like a promise; so casually cruel in the name of being honest." Honesty...truth, can be shared in a way that is cold and cruel.

So, to prevent the truth from being cold and harsh, John brings in a second significant theme: love. Each instance of the word "love" here in 2nd John is from the same root word: *Agape*. *Agape* is a distinctly Biblical kind of love. The Biblical authors essentially invented this word to convey what Christian love is all about, because the other three Greek words for love

weren't sufficient to communicate what this "Gospel love" is all about. And with Jesus as the prime example: agape is a love that puts others first. Agape love makes sacrifices for others. This is Christian love. This is agape. This is how we are to love one another, as he writes here.

A couple weeks ago there was an article in *Relevant*, which is an online magazine about the intersection of the Christian faith and popular culture. **The article was titled, "Do You Just Love God Because You're Supposed To?" (Relevant)** I suspect that question cuts a little too closely to the heart for a lot of us. In a nutshell the author says that the things we work hard at in our faith – such as doing "Christian stuff" like reading the Bible, praying, serving others, having self-control in the face of temptation, being "good people" – that we often do these things with the motivation of an obligation and an effort to please God. But that's not the right motivation he says. Rather, we do these things because we love God.

In John 14:5, Jesus says, "If you love me, you'll do what I command." We get it reiterated here in verse 6: **"And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love" (2 John 1:6).** "Walk" is simply a metaphor for "live." And so, it's not about doing what he commands to prove our love which is how some people interpret this, or please God, or because we're "supposed to"; it's doing what he commands because we love him. We follow the commands because our hearts are filled to overflowing with love for our heavenly father who has first poured out his love for us. And our love for one another and others whom God puts in our life is much the same. We love each other (and others) because we love God, not because we want to just please God.

So, if you're having a hard time loving others...if the truth is coming across cold and calculated, or serving in the church or helping a neighbor a church member who's in need is difficult and you're struggling to be motivated to do these kinds of things: **The answer isn't "try harder to love them." The answer is: Love God more. Work on your relationship with God.** Get closer to God, and deepen your love for him. Start by recognizing the depth of your sin and how it's broken your relationship with God, and then the

length to which he's gone to forgive you and bring you back into his loving arms (like a shepherd carrying a sheep), and let that remind you how much he first loves you so that you might love him more and then "walk in love." When we truly love God, then following his commands such as loving our neighbors simply flows out of that love.

And then third, John reminds them to have discernment in their walk of faith. The word "discernment" isn't actually used, but that's what he's describing in verses 7-11. "Watch out for false teachers" he says...people who will lead you astray and deceive you. And these false teachers are people who are *inside the church family*. They are people who the lady to whom John writes, could be hosted in her home.

So, in the Roman world in this time, the hospitality industry was neither safe or noble. When I was in High School, I knew a guy named Robert Dallain, who was hired to run the Bellevue Hyatt Regency when it opened its doors in the late 1980's. That as something he was good at doing – getting a hotel up and running. And it was a noble profession. Not so in first century Roman culture.

Now, hospitality in their day undoubtedly looked different – there weren't 730 room hotels like the Bellevue Hyatt. More like Air BnB's of today, but with the owners still in the home with the guests staying there. And Christians became known for their hospitality at this time. **Gracious hospitality was one way the early Church distinguished itself and made its mark in the world.** And some of the people they'd host to stay at their homes for a night or two would be people coming with a message for their church that met in their house, or met in the house of their neighbor or whatever. But then there were people who took advantage of the Christian hospitality and would come with a message that actually undermined the gospel. And so, John is warning the lady to whom he writes not to have someone like that stay in her home or teach in her church.

What might the false teaching have been? **From what we read in these last few verses the false teaching seems to be a faith that was devoid of Jesus.** So, it's a message that denies the truth and the love of Jesus. The very two

things he's been writing about (truth/love), that are absolutely at the center of Jesus' life, ministry, and mission...that is the core of what they denied in denying Jesus Christ. If you're going to remove Jesus from your gospel, then there's no gospel at all. There's no good news because there's no Jesus. There's no truth of his life, death, and resurrection, and no love that motivated him in his life, death, and resurrection.

What we see is that: **Discernment in regards to truth and love is so necessary in our journey of faith.** It's too easy to get skewed and out of balance by teaching that leads us astray. Some of us might say, "Oh, well, today we don't really have false teachers in the Christian faith and this is kind an irrelevant teaching for us today." Hogwash! Today, there are tons of Christians who essentially leave out love, and they've made it all about the truth, trying to force Jesus on others. Jesus himself never does that. And so, their walk with Jesus comes across as cold, harsh, judgmental, and utterly unloving. It repels people and turns them off from the good news of Jesus, and it makes me sick. This is a super-common expression of the faith that is completely undermining the Good news of Jesus. It's like a Five Guys burger with no bun, lettuce, ketchup or mustard or any other toppings. Just the truth of a beef patty: ugly-looking and not very tasty.

Then there are tons of other Christians who focus only on love, to the point that the truth of Jesus – his claims, his teachings, his death and resurrection – are relegated to the margins. Jesus is emptied of his depth, power, and meaning. So, people are attracted to this faith, but there's no truth to it, there's no transformational good news; there's nothing that stands out from anything the world offers. In short, there's no clinging to the objective truth of who Jesus is. This makes me sick, too. It's just a mushy quagmire of love with no foundation because the truth of Jesus has been utterly washed away. It's like a burger with no meat: You know: Where's the beef? It looks nice, but you can't rightfully call it a burger, can you?

Both positions are distortions of Jesus and distortions of the Christian faith. A person with a discerning faith finds the balance between the two, and when to emphasize one or the other, so that the truth of Jesus is lived out in love. So, people are attracted by how we "walk" in our faith, because of the

love, but at the center of it is the truth of Jesus Christ: the good news of Christ crucified for our sins, and raised from the dead on the third day.

So, nearly 2,000 years after he wrote this, **John is giving us an extremely relevant 3-fold message: We must be discerning Jesus followers with both his truth and his love.** We walk with one foot in both. Sometimes, admittedly, it's like they're each on one side of a fence. And straddling a fence can be uncomfortable. But with proper discernment, we *can* navigate it. We need not throw in the towel on love or truth. We need both, and must do the hard work of balancing them out, rather than standing just on one side of the fence or the other. In John's gospel, we read that Jesus was full of "grace and truth" (John 1:14). "Grace" and "truth" are fairly synonymous. So, Jesus was full of both, not just one or the other. We too, can walk in such a way that people see both the love and the truth of Jesus.

In the places where you and I each live, work, and play, I hope that we would walk with this kind of discernment, so the truth and love of Jesus are both on display for the world to see. Probably we each tend to lean toward his love or his truth more naturally. I would simply ask you to pray about that, do some honest self-reflection, and then intentionally take steps to live with more of the truth of Jesus or the love of Jesus that may be lacking in your faith walk.

Because, we need them both. We need the love of Jesus and we need the truth of Jesus. And we need discernment about how to walk in them both, so that people would be drawn to the truth and the love of Jesus himself. Let's pray...Amen.