

The Marks of the Christian

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Preacher: Doug Norman

[0 : 0 0] And as everyone's already remarked, we'll be covering 2 John this morning, and it's the first part in a two-part look at the latter epistles of John.

And I've called our sermon The Marks of the Christian because I think the Apostle John focuses in all three of his letters on ways that the believer can test the validity of their confession of faith.

Just because it's a short book does not mean that it is not packed with things to talk about. When I first started reading 2 John in preparation, it reminded me of another short little book that had a huge impact on my early Christian life.

It was this one, Francis Schaeffer's The Mark of the Christian. Not even 60 pages in this small format, but a book that I'd suggest that every one of you should read in your lifetime.

I gave a copy to my wife Carol to read, actually, either just before or just after we married, because I thought it was one of the most vital ways I could contribute to her Christian growth.

[1 : 2 4] So don't scorn it, nor this book to John, just because it is short. Let's look at our passage then, verses 1 to 3, where we have John's opening greetings.

The elder to the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in truth, in the truth, and not I only, but also all who know the truth, because of the truth which lives in us and will be with us forever.

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son will be with us in truth and love. As always, when we come particularly to epistle, the first question we ask is, who is the writer, in this case John, addressing?

On the surface, we might quickly conclude that this is a small house church in the home of a woman known to him. And whilst that's not impossible, most commentators agree that John is referring in the feminine to a local church, possibly Ephesus.

And this is not so unusual, is it? Throughout scripture, both Israel and the church are personified as a woman. Even we do it when we sing hymns like, the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.

[2 : 5 8] She is his new creation by water and the word. And what more can we deduce about this small church?

Obviously, from John's opening remarks, she is a beloved community. One that he loves in the truth.

In fact, he says, this church is loved by all who know the truth. That is, they're united in love to the extended body of true believers everywhere.

What's more, this fellowship with John and all other believers is on the basis of something specific. It's on the basis of a shared knowledge of the truth.

Have you noticed a number of times already that that term, the truth, is mentioned in these three verses? Know the truth?

- [4 : 04] Love the truth? Walking in the truth? So we have to ask ourselves, what does the truth mean?
- And the place to go for the answer is in the Gospel of John. Chapter 14, verse 6. Where you hear Jesus say, a famous verse you should have all learnt in Sunday school.
- I am the way, the truth, and the life. What then is the truth? It is nothing less than Jesus Christ himself and him dwelling within us.
- Besides being a beloved community, we also know from John's earlier epistle, 1 John, and even from verse 7 onwards today, that this church is a beleaguered community too.
- It is under attack from itinerant false teachers. These have come into the church and possibly drawn some away from the faith with a different message from that which was originally preached by the earlier evangelists.
- [5 : 20] So we have a church that is feeling the heat and needs encouragement to persevere in the truth. Not unlike us.
- Aren't we feeling the heat sometimes as we see a world opposed to Christ and to his message? Thirdly, we see that it is a chosen community.
- John refers to it as the chosen lady or elect lady as some versions translate it. Now election is a massive topic and not one that I plan to attempt here.
- Suffice it to say that scripture refers to the people of God, both Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament as the chosen people.
- So I'll leave it to Andrew Price to explain election more comprehensively. When we encounter the topic somewhere else, perhaps Romans or any of Paul's epistles.
- [6 : 26] I did not shirk from mentioning the topic here, however, because it begs a very important question. And that question is, how do I know that I am chosen?
- For most of us here this morning, I think this is the more important question than the mechanics of God's election and predestination anyway. And the answer to that question is what we're going to look for in the rest of this book.
- John actually concludes his opening greeting with a slight twist to the classic greeting found in other letters. He declares that there is a context to the divine blessings, grace, mercy and peace.
- For John says, grace, mercy and peace are with us all. When? In truth and love. Truth and love.
- These words have come up already and will keep coming up because they're the key words to the answer to that question that we've posed. And the crux of John's argument will be found in the next three verses.
- [7 : 46] From verse 4. It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the father commanded us.
- And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command, but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another.
- 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.
- John expresses great joy that some of the church are walking in the truth. And there are two possibilities why he refers here only to some.
- The first and saddest is that perhaps some of the community have already been led astray and are no longer walking in the truth.
- [8 : 46] The more positive option perhaps is simply that John doesn't know everyone, but he is acknowledging that some of those he knows are continuing faithfully in the truth.

And this then is a source of great joy for him. Just as it should be for us, we should always rejoice when we see those walking in the truth.

Because walking in the truth is the first part to the answer to our question, how can I know that I am chosen? Walking in the truth is a commandment of the Father.

John 12 verse 50 tells us that this commandment leads to eternal life. So the answer to how do I have eternal life? Walk in the truth. We've already seen that the truth is Jesus Christ, the Father's Son.

So then walking in the truth literally means walking in Jesus. Notice how many times the word command appeared in this section.

[9 : 56] Four times in fact. So clearly, this is not some optional extra to being a Christian. These are things that are the essentials of the faith.

The things that mark us as being chosen is knowing Christ. So how does this look practically?

How does knowing Christ or walking in Jesus mean? It means to confess the truth of Jesus as God's word made flesh and living in accord with him.

1 John 1 6 and 7 says if we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in darkness we lie and do not live out the truth.

But if we walk in the light as he is in the light we have fellowship with one another. And the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin.

[11 : 03] Walking in Jesus means that we truly know him. Not just some intellectual assent to his existence nor a general acceptance that his teachings constitute a good way to live.

Rather it is to believe with all your heart that Jesus is not simply a man but that he is God God made flesh.

And therefore it is to have Jesus at the very center of your life. Jesus instructions his example his sacrifice and his mission must at the end of the day be the things those things that motivate your decisions that animate your desires that place the greatest claim on your resources your time your money and that totally command your attention.

the apostle actually goes on to be even more challenging in 1 John 2 verse 6 he says whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

Are you walking as Jesus did? Well you might ask me how did he walk? The best description of how Jesus walked would be to say that he walked in love.

[12 : 39] love characterized every interaction he had on earth even when he was being assertive about the purity of the temple or when he was calling out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

If you only doubt the second part of verse 6 tells us that Jesus' command is that you walk in love. Walking in truth and walking in love seem therefore to be two sides of the same coin.

You cannot have one without the other. Scripture has the two joined at the hip. In 1 Corinthians 13 verse 6 we read that love rejoices in the truth.

While in Ephesians 4 15 we hear that we speak the truth in love. If you are in the truth that I if you are in Jesus you have him in your heart then because he lives with you and within you you cannot help living a life of love.

That's the evidence that Jesus is living in you that you are walking in Christ because you cannot help living a life of love for your brother and for your neighbor.

[14 : 00] John reminds his listeners that that great commandment Jesus gave back in John 13 a new commandment I give to you to love one another as I have loved you so you must love one another by this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another is no longer a new commandment for them.

Rather walking in love has to be the single greatest evidence that here in this community and in every community of believers are true followers true disciples truly chosen people of God.

And it is through this obedience of mutual evident love that the church will withstand those who are trying to divide her. It's also the way the world will know that there is a solution for its lostness.

In his book Schaeffer actually makes a very challenging case that that John 13 new commandment text commands of us a special love for the elect for the true believers.

By extension it presupposes that we can recognize who are true believers believers because they know the truth because they know Jesus and the quality of the love therefore required of us for those true believers is massive because Jesus says we love as he has loved us.

[15 : 41] so what does that mean? We look at Jesus and we know it will be costly love. It will be visible love.

It will be filled with forgiveness for wrongs committed to him. Father forgive them for they know not what they do. It will always regret disciplining even as it is obedient in doing so.

And it will always maintain unity even when there is disharmony. So the marks of the Christian what makes you the chosen people of God those objective evidences that you should be examining yourself to see if they are there are these walking in truth and walking in love.

And why are these marks of true belief so necessary? Well verse 7 tells us I say this because many deceivers who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh have gone out into the world.

Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for but that you may be rewarded fully.

[17 : 11] Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have guard. Whoever continues in the teaching has both the father and the son.

He says there will be many deceivers. Jesus promised it, the apostles let us confirm it and our experience is that it continues even to this day.

There are many deceivers and not just in the fringes either. Unfortunately in the mainstream church too. And the main topic for their deceit always revolves around who Jesus is.

This particular group of false teachers were denying that Jesus is the Messiah that he was the son of God in the flesh and therefore denying the reality of his atoning death.

And in every generation we will be surrounded by people like this. People who teach some other view about Jesus. Not what the Bible teaches.

[18 : 27] Either they won't acknowledge him or they'll attempt to distort his teachings. Why? In order to divide us for their own purposes.

John doesn't mince his words when he refers to them. He calls them by what they are, antichrists. They're opposed to Jesus and his message.

And because they're of their father the devil, their objective is to distress and to divide the true church of God.

specifically the threat that these false teachers poses to us is they want to entice us to run ahead, John says, ahead of what the Bible has revealed.

See, John tells us that to have the son is to have the father. But he says the inverse is also true. anyone who does not continue in the teachings of Christ does not have God.

[19 : 38] Plain and simple. There is no other way. We recall the second part of that Sunday school verse. I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.

There are no other ways. There are no other ways. things. So what could running ahead look like for us? What could it entail?

Well, it means to go beyond what the Bible explicitly teaches. And unfortunately, we see it all over the place today. So-called progressive interpretations of God's commands or his gospel.

Additional revelation, like in many charismatic churches, which often contradicts scripture, directly or indirectly. Simply making stuff up to satisfy ears that only want to hear of health, wealth, and prosperity, not suffering, hardship, and endurance.

The continual pursuit of the novel, new ways of worshipping that are at best unhelpful, and at worst blasphemous.

[20 : 59] Verse 8 warns us, watch out, watch out that we don't lose our reward, that thing for which we have worked, because we've been deceived into believing a different gospel.

The work of God is this, to believe the one he has sent. so it's imperative for us. We must continue walking in the truth and walking in love, and only then can we withstand these people and their teaching.

And John doesn't pull any punches either in telling us what our response to these deceivers ought to be. In verse 10 he says, if anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them.

Anyone who welcomes them shares their wicked work. John's instruction is clear. Unless the teaching conforms with the teaching of Christ and his apostles, do not provide hospitality to those bringing a different gospel, a different message.

Literally he is saying do not greet them even. But of course, shock and horror. Isn't this unloving? I mean, isn't it a contradiction of the walking in love instruction we just had?

[22 : 24] Well, to understand this better, we need to consider the function of hospitality in those days. Bringing someone into your home had connotations of patronage in the community and even meant that the visitor was accorded a degree of protection under the local law.

So, it was a big deal. Similarly, greeting was not simply saying, hi, how are you? How you addressed someone in public accorded them standing and recognition.

So, you see, John is not suggesting that we deny someone a cup of tea or spurn them publicly. No, he is telling the church, do not provide these deceivers and antichrists with a forum to propagate their false message.

Do not accord them any recognition as representatives of Christ or his body. Do not acknowledge them as believers. That's basically what he's saying.

And by the same token, anyone who does invite these deceivers into their communities or lets them preach their deceitful doctrines in their pulpits, John says, shares in their wicked work.

[23 : 52] So, it's not mere association, which is unacceptable to John. Rather, it's the direct promotion and purposeful endorsement of heretical teaching, of false teaching that's prohibited here.

And John's warning in verse 8 was stark. Being soft on false teaching means running the risk of serious spiritual suffering. So, that means we have to be discerning, discerning about the teaching we listen to, the teaching we allow in our pulpit.

It means that we have to be biblically astute so that we can detect, that we can be doctrinally critical and detect false messages. Basically, it means that we need to have what Paul calls the Berean spirit.

The Bereans were more noble because they went home and checked everything, even the apostles Paul preached, against the word. In modern churches, this text of John has not been well received because at its heart it says, truth trumps tolerance.

And isn't tolerance the new idol? But walking in love can never be an excuse for ignoring the undermining of God's truth.

[25 : 23] in fact, uncritical hospitality of false and deceptive teaching is itself unloving. It's unloving to your community of believers and to the false teacher himself.

John ends his short letter in verse 12 and 13. He says, I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face so that our joy may be complete.

The children of your sister who is chosen by God, the word chosen again, send their greetings. John's final words here are a reflection of the practical outworking of his teaching.

These greetings from a sister church which earnestly cares for their spiritual well-being, as well as John's own heartfelt affection for these fellow believers and a desire to see them.

At the start of the passage, he said he had joy at knowing they were walking in the truth. And now he wants to complete their mutual joy by supporting and upholding them in person.

[26 : 44] It is precisely this kind of fellowship in the truth that protects us from falling into falsehood. The marks of the true Christian, walking in truth, walking in love, will only be rooted and strengthened and manifested within the community of true believers.

There is no such thing as the solo Christian. We do not and cannot walk alone. Joy as them.

By abiding in the truth. As a church, Holy Trinity, we have to protect our pulpits and all our teaching occasions with a zeal for the truth.

The truth that Jesus is the only way to God and without him, all are perishing. John said it, when you leave Jesus behind, you lose all possibility of a life with God.

We have a world full of wanting God, but they'd like to leave Jesus out of it. And how will we have the same complete joy as them? By obeying Jesus.

[28 : 07] Not only that we believe the truth about him, but that we seek to obey his commands and walk as he did, in spite of the opposition of the world and the unbelievers around us.

And how will we have the same complete joy as them? By loving your brother and your neighbor. Christian love, as we have seen, is an obedient response to God's revelation of himself in Jesus, which in turn means a life of costly service to one another.

But it's by that kind of love the world will know that we are his disciples. And it's the way that we will know that we are chosen because we will have the marks of the Christian.