

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 24 – 2 John

Some have thought the three letters of John to have a stronger connection to each other than is probably warranted. They were written to different people, to people with different needs, and I will therefore treat each letter as something which should be studied independently of the others. They all emphasize a sharp distinction between truth and falsehood, between righteousness and wickedness, between light and darkness, and between love and hatred, but these are simply John's focus regardless of whom he is writing.

The apostle introduces himself as "the Elder", possibly a reference to his ecclesiastical office, but more likely at this point a reference to his age. He addresses the letter to a Christian lady who, though unidentified, is well-known and well-loved by others in the fellowship of believers where she lived. The letter is as well to her children with whom John has had contact and who were also believers. It seems that the local church met at her house, or at the very least she was the one who provided hospitality to itinerant preachers.

John commends this woman and her children for their love of the truth, and, in doing so, beseeches them to continue in that love and in keeping all the commandments of God. At the same time, however, he warns her about false teachers. Clearly, this is the main purpose of his letter.

False teachers, many of them gnostic heretics, were roaming about in her area seeking every opportunity to deceive others. They denied the incarnation, the two natures of Christ (divine and human), and, by virtue of that, His atonement. They would never acknowledge that they were false teachers, of course, but by smooth words and every deceptive means they worked their way into the churches, presented themselves as faithful preachers and sought to take advantage of any and every means of accommodation offered to them. The apostle wants this woman to be on her guard and exercising great care so that she does not unwittingly give them opportunity to promote their deadly error in her home, or offer them any hospitality which could in some way be of help to them in their anti-Christian mission.

John does not suggest that any Christian can lose his salvation (v.8), but it is important that we press ahead and not fall back if we are to run the race before us and receive a full reward. Where he says that we are not to receive the purveyor of false doctrine into our house nor greet him (vv.10,11), he would have us to understand that this is not just about etiquette or the matter of exchanging innocent pleasantries. He is drawing attention, rather, to the often subtle but always corrupt and poisonous teaching of heretics who must on every occasion be steadfastly resisted lest we give them any encouragement and so participate in their evil deeds.

This point is very practical and most important. Let every Christian in our own day pay diligent heed to what is here written. If we go out of our way to be careful in the preparation and handling of food, so that it comes nowhere near anything that might contaminate it and adversely affect the body, let us be even more careful with regard to the administration of food for the spirit. We may confront a confused believer (or even an unbeliever) with the error of his way, and doing so may lead to something which is ultimately profitable to him (see James 5:19,20). But the heretic peddling his wares, whether he does so ignorantly or fully aware of his deception, is not to be given the least help or encouragement in seizing an opportunity to infiltrate the inner sanctum of the church and destroy souls. Let there be no room given for any tolerance of error!

The apostle concludes his letter by telling this dear lady that he has several other things he would like to share with her, but that he plans to visit her when he is able to do so, and he will hold off until then therefore when he is able to speak with her face to face. John, who it seems is familiar with other members of her family, sends greetings from the children of her sister who is also a Christian.

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