

The Proper Practice of the Church Part 2 - 2 John 7-13

Scripture Reading: Galatians 1:6-10

Introduction

False teachers and false teaching have been a problem in the church since its earliest days.

We just heard how Paul warned the church in Galatia about those who might come preaching a different gospel.

Paul also wrote to the church in Ephesus [**Ephesians 4:14**] about maturing in truth so as not to be tossed about by every wind of doctrine and human cunning, craftiness, and deceitful schemes.

John also wrote to a group of believers in Ephesus, so they may have been writing to the same folks.

We are making a big mistake when we begin to think we're immune from false teachers today because laxity and inattention put us right where the enemy wants us.

I'm sure you've heard the old expression when someone is overconfident and is told they're "riding for a fall."

That was evidently the church in Corinth back in Paul's day, as it seems they thought they were beyond the reach of false teachers.

So Paul wrote to them [**1 Corinthians 10:12**], "Let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."

It's rare for a false teacher to stand up in a church and start spewing doctrine that denies the core truths of the Bible.

The enemy is far too clever for that, and he typically sows tares among the wheat, cloaking error with just enough appearance of truth to let it slip in unawares.

A common entryway for error today is through the desire to be accepted and avoid criticism.

Last week, we saw how standing firm in the truth can lead to accusations of being unloving, and many churches simply can't accept that label - so they compromise on the truth to be liked by the culture.

Similarly, error can enter when someone in the pastor's intimate circle becomes entangled in sin, and suddenly, a previously orthodox stance is dropped for the sake of the loved one.

For example, it's quite common for a pastor who clearly presented biblical truth concerning sexuality and marriage to do a 180 when a family member announces they are gay.

The other major artery by which false teaching enters the church is the desire for novelty.

Perhaps it's hardwired in our DNA, but we've also been trained to desire newness and innovation, and where there's an itch, you can count on someone to come along to scratch it.

Rob Bell gave people what they wanted to hear with his book Love Wins, as did Rabbi Kushner before him with his book When Bad Things Happen to Good People.

Both were heretical in every sense of the word, and both were welcomed into many churches and Christian homes.

And many people receive false teaching that tickles their ears from the name-it-claim-it, prosperity gospel hucksters.

Tragically, many false teachings come straight out of the seminaries we have historically relied on to train pastors.

The Bible is an ancient book that has been studied, dissected, and systematized for thousands of years.

While I appreciate more recent commentaries for their relevance to today's culture, every book of the Bible has already had hundreds of books and articles written about it.

Every orthodox position has been thoroughly sorted out and vetted, and some pastor somewhere has preached a sermon on any passage you might pick from every angle imaginable.

So, to remain relevant, many professors and other “authorities” have begun to look for new ground, new ideas to promote, and new ways of understanding just to sell books and be considered “academic.”

They then teach these new ways of understanding to their students, who go on to pastor churches and spread the false teachings.

Therefore, we err if we are only looking outside the church for false teachers because they don’t only belong to the cults - in many cases, it’s just as Pogo famously said, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

Jesus told his disciples [**Matthew 24:11**] to be aware that many false teachers would arise in the church to lead people astray, and Paul warned Timothy [**2 Timothy 4:3**] that the time was coming when people would choose false teaching over truth - and there should be no doubt we are in those days.

That’s what makes this section of John’s second letter so meaningful to us as he writes about the danger of false teachers and how to deal with them.

I. The danger: false teachers

Last week, we saw how John urged his readers to know, believe, and obey the truth - in other words, to “walk” in it.

And we saw him implore them to love one another and how love and truth are the twin rails on which Christianity rides.

Now, in verse 7 [**2 John 7**], we see why as John begins the verse with the word “for” as a means of explanation, saying:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.

In this verse, we see the nature of the false teachers who were trying to infiltrate the church.

First, they are deceivers who have gone out into the world.

They were missionaries of a sort who were intentionally acting as counters to Christ’s apostles, as representatives of the devil, to spread lies.

We have to allow that they may have considered themselves to be Christian missionaries carrying the truth and bringing further enlightenment to the churches.

Still, they were imposters from a biblical standpoint.

And their particular heresy was that they did not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.

As we saw when we went through John’s first letter, denial of the doctrine of the incarnation and the uniting of deity and humanity in the person of Jesus is to deny the true gospel.

Jesus had to be both fully human and fully divine simultaneously for salvation to be possible.

Picture the gulf created by sin as a broad, deep chasm between God and man.

No one can possibly reach from one side to the other, so a bridge is necessary, and Jesus is that bridge.

Now consider that if Jesus weren’t fully human, the bridge wouldn’t reach all the way to the mankind side of the chasm, and if he weren’t fully divine, it wouldn’t reach all the way to God.

Either way, the bridge couldn’t be sufficient to act as a bridge at all - without the incarnation, the gospel falls apart.

Jesus was the eternal Christ born in the flesh, as the human and divine natures were united at his birth, never to be divided again as he remains the permanent God-man.

By denying that truth, the false teachers were putting people in eternal jeopardy, making it a most serious deception and turning the false teachers into antichrists.

Look with me at verse 9 [**2 John 9**], where John writes:

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

In claiming special knowledge, the false teachers had run so far ahead that John somewhat sarcastically says they've outrun God.

No one can claim to have God the Father while denying the Son.

The Son is both the revelation of the Father, as we read in **John 1:18**, and the way to the Father, as we see in **John 14:6**.

Therefore, acknowledging the Son is the way to possess the Father, while denying the Son is to lose the Father.

That remains as true today as it was in John's day, and all the religions of the world that claim to know God without acknowledging the Son miss the mark.

There are no alternative routes to God.

Because the situation is so serious, John warns his readers to be on guard against the false teachers in verse 8 [**2 John 8**].

He says, in effect, "Watch out! Don't relax your vigilance for a moment, or you may lose what you have."

Unfortunately, John's use of pronouns in this verse has resulted in a bit of difficulty in determining how best to understand his meaning.

At issue is the fact that some ancient manuscripts read "that *we* have worked for" while others render the same phrase as "that *you* have worked for," and determining which sense presents a challenge.

In the first case, John would be concerned that his and the other apostles' labors would prove to be in vain.

Paul expressed similar concern in his letter to the Galatians [**Galatians 4:11**].

With the other translation, John's concern would be that his readers were in danger of losing something they themselves had worked for.

Since we know that salvation is a gift given by the grace and mercy of God, we know John can't be concerned with his readers losing their salvation - it's not something they worked for.

So, it would seem that he is concerned with their losing reward for faithful service.

That would make sense because he had just written about the need to walk in the truth.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about the loss of reward in 1 Corinthians 3 when he wrote about the testing of what Christ-followers have done and how some would get into heaven as if escaping through the flames as their works were revealed by the testing fire to be no more than wood, hay, and stubble.

A third solution might be to interpret the "we" as John, including himself in the idea of the loss of reward and showing solidarity with his readers.

To me, the best sense seems to be that John is concerned that his readers remain vigilant and stay the course so they are fully rewarded in heaven, but neither interpretation seriously damages the text.

Next, having outlined the danger of the false teachers and the seriousness of their deception, John tells his readers how they should handle the arrival of a false teacher.

Let's look at verses 10 and 11 together [**2 John 10-11**]:

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

Clearly, John says his readers should reject the false teachers and do so, as they said in the movie [Apocalypse Now](#), "With extreme prejudice."

II. The command: reject them

John's order here is uncompromising, and the command to reject them so wholly and abruptly seems harsh, given that Christ-followers are typically commanded to "seek to show hospitality" [**Romans 12:13**].

But the potential danger of the false teachers' error and the consequences of being drawn into it was so grave that the best course of action was to have nothing to do with them.

Remember, the best outcome was to lose one's reward, but those who fully followed the lead of the false teachers in denying the incarnation of Christ were lost.

We need to be careful here and understand that those who were already saved but drawn into the false teaching would lose reward, and no one having once possessed Father would then turn around and lose the Father.

No one loses their salvation, but allowing false teaching into the church could prevent some from being saved.

John is saying that, despite appearances, by their denial of the Son's incarnation, the false teachers have demonstrated that they are not saved individuals.

Allowing them in would be equivalent to welcoming someone with a deadly disease into fellowship with those who are immunocompromised.

It would be foolish and spiritually deadly.

But what are we to think when the apostle of love, who just a few verses back reminded his readers of the command to love, now commands his readers to be fiercely intolerant?

We can't rightly reject either command, so we have to find a balance between them.

Last week, we saw how we have to balance truth and love and not swing to either extreme.

What John writes here applies to those who are so tolerant they will accept anyone's views and those who are so intolerant they condemn everybody who disagrees with them on any point.

So, let's examine John's command and see if we can strike a proper balance by better understanding it.

I want to look at three facts we must bear in mind.

First, John is writing about *teachers* of false doctrine, not merely people who believe a false doctrine, and there is a difference.

While I believe both are dangerous, those who go out as an official teacher of falsehood are far more dangerous than someone who is deceived and needs guidance to the truth.

I believe that Christ-followers may welcome and entertain someone who holds false views and seek to bring them to a better understanding.

In the case of the casual unbeliever, John's warning in verse 9 to watch yourselves is in order.

However, in the case of someone who is either officially ordained or establishes themselves to teach fundamental error to others while masking it as Christianity, we must reject not only the error but the bearer of it.

Should you welcome the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses who show up at your door in for a visit and try to set them straight?

They fall into a grey area for me, and my advice is the same as John's: proceed with caution.

As a pastor, I am always careful about which books I recommend because not everyone can handle everything.

Some people can handle meat, and some need milk, and I am always conscious of a person's dietary needs.

I have invited them in and had those conversations and can tell you that you had better be ready and know your Bible well because those who come knocking don't show up without being well-prepared in advance.

For a time, I regularly met with a pair of young men who came knocking and had lively discussions with them.

Let me tell you, they were sincere and well-versed in their falsehood, and they never gave up - they just kept coming back with an answer for whatever truth I showed them.

Eventually, I had to determine that I was not engaging in wise stewardship of my time and stopped engaging with them. I was never going to be swayed, and neither were they, so the discussions were pointless.

So, while I won't tell you to shun those people, I will say to proceed with caution should you engage with them. Know the truth, remain vigilant against falsehood, and mind the use of your time.

Assess if they are honestly deceived but winnable or intractable teachers of falsehood and proceed accordingly.

The **second** thing we need to consider is that since John was writing to a local church, he may have been talking about someone officially visiting a church, not private hospitality.

The "house" John refers to in his command could just as well be where the church met for worship as a private home. I am very protective of my pulpit here at Brick Church because of the importance of what is taught from this platform. I'm mindful that allowing someone to preach is an implied endorsement of what they present.

That was even more true in John's day when hospitality was seen as a form of sponsorship into the community as the host acted as a sort of patron to the visitor.

The **third** thing we want to note is that John's command is specific.

In this letter, he's talking about teachers of false doctrine, specifically the doctrine of the incarnation.

He isn't commanding his readers to shun everyone who disagrees with them over some relatively minor point.

I am glad our adult Christian Ed class is doing an in-depth doctrine study.

They are currently looking at the doctrine of election, and the differences between the teachings of John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius, and the centuries-long battle between the two camps makes for a perfect illustration here.

I'm not going to take sides in that battle this morning.

I only want to say that I have far fewer problems with Calvin or Arminius than I do with their followers, who become so entrenched in their positions that they separate themselves from the other.

Let me be clear - we want to know God's Word to the best of our ability and align our beliefs and practices to it.

That's not a matter that is even in dispute.

But another truth is we can't always know with absolute certainty that we have fully understood everything about God.

God himself said through Isaiah [Isaiah 55:8-9]

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Is the doctrine of election important? Yes! God took space in his Word to talk about it!

But we need to acknowledge it's one of those things we can only do our best to understand and describe, and it isn't a matter to divide over.

The same is true about many other doctrinal positions as well - it's just timely that they're studying that one now.

What we need to understand is not all doctrines are created equal, and there is a vast difference between doctrines and distinctives. And preferences fall even further down on the list. We can have disagreements over some things and not divide.

John doesn't command that his readers - or we - should shun everyone who disagrees with us on any point.

However, those who deny the essential deity and humanity of Christ are to be denied any welcome or even a word of blessing such as "Have a nice day," lest we are seen to be accepting them as a brother and thereby encourage them.

Because their works are wicked, we are not to have even the slightest part in them.

His message delivered, John closes out his letter in verses 12-13, saying [2 John 12-13]:

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete. The children of your elect sister greet you.

This closing greeting shows the importance of close fellowship with other Christ-followers.

III. Closing words: stay close

Technological advances have allowed most people immediate access to everyone they know 24/7.

Most of us can pull a smartphone out of our pocket and send a text message or email to anyone in our contact list and know that it will be delivered in the blink of an eye.

But that hasn't necessarily led to better communication as the written word is still inferior to talking to someone.

Written words are far more easily misunderstood because messages aren't just conveyed by words alone.

The written word lacks the tone of the speaker's voice, the expression on his face, and the body language - the posture and motion - that clarifies the message.

John is aware of how profitable face-to-face communication is, literally mouth-to-mouth in the original Greek, as he expresses his desire to visit them and share further.

When Christ-followers commune in person, there is a fullness of joy that the written word simply can't express.

New Testament Christianity knows nothing of complete joy outside of the fellowship of believers sharing their mutual fellowship with God.

Finally, John closes by including greetings from the congregation where he's residing, showing the solidarity that should exist between local churches and individual believers as long as they have sound doctrinal beliefs.

Fellowship between believers should result from shared fellowship with the Father and the Son.

Conclusion

This relatively brief letter emphasizes the essential topics of walking in the truth - believing and living according to the truth of God's Word - and loving our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

These two aspects of faithful Christianity are crucial, especially when facing those who come to deceive us.

Knowing, believing, and faithfully living according to the truth enables us to recognize false teaching.

And being committed to one another in love diminishes the impact of false teaching through mutual support, encouragement, and accountability.

The stakes surrounding false teachers are incredibly high.

That's especially true concerning the denial of the incarnation, and many today still maintain, as they did in John's day, that believing in the deity and humanity of Jesus is a myth that we've outgrown.

As we close our study, let me give you some tips you can use when evaluating a teacher or their claims.

First, assess if they are adding an extrabiblical source of authority to support their claim.

Second, see if they add to the requirements for salvation and include anything one must do to be saved.

Third, check to see if they take anything away from the person and work of Jesus.

If anyone denies his full deity and/or humanity or finds his work of redemption inadequate, they are the kind of false teacher John warns us about.

And, in love, we must have nothing to do with them because it's unloving to set aside or diminish the truth, especially when doing so could cause someone to suffer eternity apart from God. Let's pray.