

Katie and I got married a little over 21 years ago.

We wanted a simple wedding ceremony, a simple reception - a few friends, some family, a little cake, some punch and that was it. But then, the relatives got involved. Sound familiar?

What started out as an uncomplicated and straightforward wedding became a hand wringing, temper testing logistical nightmare - we wish it was over wedding. Over the months leading up to the wedding, ever single aspect, I mean every single aspect of the wedding changed with the exception of Katie and I being the Bride and Groom at the ceremony.

I remember arriving at the wedding reception thinking that we had arrived at the wrong place because it looked nothing like we had originally planned, the cake was just horrific, the band was right out of Vegas - I didn't know that we even had a band!, I didn't recognize a soul.....but then, I saw the relatives - I wasn't in the wrong place - I was just naive.

I had imagined so many different kind of romantic emotions that we would have on our wedding day, but the one emotion that overwhelmed all the others that day was, relief that the wedding was over.

Then, a week later, the alarm clock went off at 4:00 am and I had to get back to work. Now, real life was about to set in.

We had planned, debated, discussed and argued every aspect of the wedding day, but now as I pour my coffee I realized that the vows and commitments I had made a week before weren't about that wedding day at all, they were about living those vows and commitments for better or worse. Now I knew that, intellectually before I got married, but waking up at 4:00 am, rushing in and out of the shower and facing a serious commute with only a cup of coffee to fend off cold brought it all home to me: Getting started is the easy part and finishing is always great, but the day to day, that is hard work.

Here in our Scripture today, 2 John, we see the Apostle John encouraging the church to do the difficult thing, continue in the faith. John not only gives us encouragement, but he also outlines a couple of things that we are to keep in the forefront of our minds to help

in continuing in the faith. Starting our faith in Jesus Christ is where it all begins, but continuing our faith in Jesus Christ is where it counts

Here we have the Apostle John who wrote the Gospel of John, Revelation, and also 1 John, 2 John and 3 John. Even though John does not identify himself in this letter, over the years biblical scholars have shown that the Apostle John did write 2 John and 3 John and he wrote them in the order of 1 John, 2 John and 3 John.

Here is the situation of 2 John: Scholars have put together that the Apostle John has had some visitors from the church he wrote to in 1 John. John is pleased with the faith and character of these visitors from the church and so as they return John gives them a note to take back with them.

Now John could have told the visitors, "Tell everyone hello for me back at the church." But that wouldn't be as effective or as powerful as a note containing his very own words. John could have verbally told the church folks what to say, but a letter carries more weight and John can use his own words, carefully chosen. So John writes this note of encouragement to the same church he wrote the letter of 1 John to.

This short letter would be carried by members visiting from the church being written to. Christianity was not under protection from any government, national or local and so an indirect recipient and an indirect author were used to avoid any trouble if the letter fell into hostile hands. See, the people carrying the letter were very vulnerable as they traveled the Roman Empire.

Here we see that John uses the title "The Elder" instead of his personal name (verse 1). It has been shown over the years that without a doubt the term "the Elder" is in fact, the Apostle John. John does this in this instance because his position is more important than his name. John is more than a local pastor, John has great authority over those he is writing to. Remember, the Apostle John is in his 90's so in all ways John is the elder to those he is writing to.

The term "The Elder" is in the Greek text *πρεσβύτερος* (presbuteros) - from where we get the word Presbyterian. This literally means the old person. So if you take it literally, the name of our church is: First church of the old people.

However, HOWEVER, though the literal meaning is old person, the connotation of *πρεσβύτερος* (presbuteros) isn't just old people, the connotation is wise and experienced spiritual leaders. In both the New Testament church and in the Jewish synagogue the spiritual leaders were called elders. So, the connotation of the name of our church isn't a bunch of old people, No, the connotation of the name of our church is: First church of the wise and experienced spiritual leaders.

Can we live up to the name on the building?

I believe so, if we do what John tells us, to continue on in the faith.

Notice that John starts off the letter by addressing it to "the chosen lady and her children". Some have taken this to mean that this letter is written to a woman and her family, but there is very little to support such an idea. In the original Greek it the term is "the elect lady and her children." The combination of Lady and Elect is an early expression of Christian courtesy directed toward a church. Lady = church and Children = members of church. It was very common to refer to the church as the elect, but not to single individuals. The content of the letter is also appropriate to a church rather than a family.

In verse 3 John gives a greeting to the church, which is not merely a wish but an affirmation on how the church is to continue to live in Christ. John uses the combination of grace, mercy and peace as an encouragement to the people of the church.

Grace = the love and favor shown by God toward Christians.

Mercy = God's faithfulness in his relationship to humans.

Peace = the sum total of the blessings given by God in his grace and mercy.

This all adds up to the concept of well being through salvation. Ultimately what John is encouraging (and the recipients would easily understand this) is that the salvation we have received will ultimately bring wholeness into our lives. These will be ours John says. See, right in the beginning of the note, John encourages the people, and us, that whatever is going on in your life, whatever has been, what will be, ultimately is grace, mercy and peace - You will be whole, because of your salvation.

Understand that our salvation isn't a one time event that we look back upon at a given date and time. Our salvation is the beginning of our continued salvation. See, we are

saved and in the Father's dominion the moment we give our life over to Jesus Christ, but our salvation will be complete when we stand before the Father in heaven. Here John is telling us: You are saved yes, but this is not all there is, this right now, is only a very small portion of what will be. You will be made whole.

We see that John addresses those who know the truth and love in the truth. (verse 1-4) The kind of love John speaks about here is agape love. We have seen from our study in 1 John that agape love is a love that is a selfless sacrificial love that we as humans cannot generate; We have seen that agape love is given to us from God. Here, we see that agape love does not operate in a vacuum. Agape love exists, John says along with the truth.

John is pleased that he has seen the members of the church walking in the truth, but John encourages them to not only walk in the truth, but in the truth and love. Let's look at what John means by that.

John has shown us that truth is not just an abstract concept, like Pontius Pilate asking Jesus Christ, "What is Truth?" For John the truth signifies what is ultimately real, and in the end, for John, this means God himself. This is not a speculative truth, but a truth that, is practical, a truth that is hands on, a truth that involves an intimate and ongoing relationship with God. A truth that eschatologically will be truth with us, forever.

Truth, the implication here is that the honest believer's goal is to stay with the truth, while the dishonest (who are not really believers at all) have their own agenda. John has shown in the book of 1 John that the fact is, either you believe or you don't. There is no such thing as honestly, truly believing and then not believing. We saw that once you believe, you always will believe; We saw that the presence of the Holy Spirit in you makes it impossible to disbelieve once you believe.

John is well aware that those who gain their salvation cannot lose their salvation, however, our Christian walk can become ineffective if we misunderstand spiritual life.

I have run into a number of people who have their own unique spin on spiritual life. They walk through life gathering various thoughts and experiences, taking in this and that, and then come to a personal conclusion about spiritual life. One of the most common conclusions folks seem to come to is essentially this: Understanding God is so complex and so beyond us, that we cannot even hope to grasp the spiritual world - so all we can

do, is try the best we can. Their conclusion is, that if you and I try the best we can, what more can be asked of us?

Sounds reasonable. I mean the best I can do, is the best I can do, how can God ask me to do any more than my best? The best I can do is give it my best shot.

Now that may sound like a reasonable conclusion, BUT, where exactly in Scripture do we see any of the Prophets or the Apostles or Jesus for that matter, even insinuating that all we need to do is the best we can? Keep looking, and looking, because its not in the Bible. Doing the best I can may sound like a reasonable idea but it is not Christian nor is it biblical. What does doing the best I can mean anyway? If you chase that phrase, "doing the best I can" long enough you will find that it defies any definition and in the end means - nothing.

If you are guiding your life by the philosophy, "I'm doing the best I can", you are not living Christianity - you are living what in the end will be a very empty philosophy.

What does the Apostle John say we are to do?

Take a look at verse 4, we are not told to do the best we can, instead, God the Father has commanded us to walk in the truth. John has defined the truth in 1 John and he defines it again, in the negative, in verse 7. There in verse 7 John reminds us that deceivers have come to teach us what sounds Christian, and what sounds reasonable, but it is not Christian or reasonable - and it is not Christian or reasonable because the teachers deny that Jesus has come in the flesh.

This is John's definition of truth: Jesus has come in the flesh.

Now if you remember from our study of 1 John that this is more than saying I believe in Jesus. "Jesus coming in the flesh" means much more than a person saying, "I believe in Jesus" it is a theological understanding of who Jesus is and it is based upon stressing the fact that the incarnation of Jesus is a historical fact.

1. The incarnation of Jesus was not temporary. In other words, Jesus didn't start out human, then God entered into him. No, Jesus was always God, the second part of the Trinity, who became human.

2. In the flesh means that humanity and God were truly united in Jesus, Jesus is fully human and fully God.

John goes so far as to say that anyone who welcomes a false teacher shares in the work of the false teacher. (Verse 11) In John's day that meant welcoming a false teacher into the church. If a teacher was welcomed into a local church this would by association indicate that the teacher's work was acceptable. In our day, it is pretty much the same thing. If we welcome a teacher here, people will assume that what the teacher teaches, we agree with.

When John says in verse 9, "those who run ahead", John is referring to the teaching of the false teachers who had been trying to influence the church. Running ahead means a reworking of who Jesus is. So anyone who says Jesus is something other than God who came in the flesh, is a person who has ruin ahead. This would be people who say that Jesus is just a prophet, as Islam claims, or that Jesus is a god among many gods, as Mormonism claims, or that Jesus is one of many avatars as the new age movement claims.

Redefine Jesus, and you redefine your way out of Christianity.

All this said, what is John trying to get at for us this morning? Why should John be so worried about the church if those in the church cannot lose their salvation?

For example, if the members of the church, who are truly Christian, listen to the false teachers and believe their false information about who Jesus is, the true Christians will not lose their salvation, they just don't have things exactly right. Who has everything exactly right? So what's the big deal, they still are Christian?

Well, let's jump back the verse one. When John speaks of walking in the truth, this is equivalent to walking in the light. In 1 John chapter 1 John gave us the powerful illustration of walking in the light. He told us that if we take our eyes off of Jesus Christ we venture out into the shadows, and eventually end up in the dark, then we cannot see where we are going. Remember, when he spoke of being in the dark, John meant being in the dark spiritually. Not being able to see or understand God's direction in your life.

John told us that eventually we will not be able to hear the Holy Spirit - and then the Christian life then becomes very frustrating.

Here John directly tells us that if we receive unsound teaching. It hurts our relationship with God. Unsound teaching isn't just more information, it affects our spiritual life, it affects our understanding of who God is and how God relates to us.

Then John goes further. In verse 8 John tells us "Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully." John is not speaking of losing your salvation here, rather John is speaking of heavenly rewards.

See not only does accepting false teaching hurt our relationship here on earth, but somehow it has eternal results as well. The bible does not reveal exactly what it means when it speaks of rewards in the afterlife and John doesn't give us details here. But what John does indicate is that if we accept false teaching we will hurt our relationship with God now and later.

So what does John tell us to do, so that we can stay away from spiritual darkness?

John, tells us how to act in a very practical way. First remain in the truth: that means continue to believe and understand that Jesus has come in the flesh.

Second use the agape love that God has given you as you remain in sound belief. (we saw a few weeks ago that we receive agape love from God, and that the more time we spent with God the more ability he gives us to use the agape love he has given us.

Third, stay away from false teachers, they will hurt your relationship with God

These three things taken together, John says, will encourage us to continue in the faith.