

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 4 October 2015

No. T0905

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Short letters in the New Testament: 2 John - Healthy Families

This week we start a new series of talks on the letters in the New Testament that only have one chapter. Today we'll consider 2 John under the title "Healthy families", and then in future weeks we'll look at "Healthy churches" in 3 John, "Healthy relationships" in Philemon and, finally "Healthy faith" in Jude.

So today's subject is 2 John. I wonder how much you know about it? It's one of the shortest books in the Bible, consisting of only 13 verses. Along with 3 John, it seems to form two little postcard-like notes to people John knew. 2 John is unique in the Bible in that it is a letter written specifically to a woman, whilst 3 John is written to a man named Gaius and we'll hopefully think about that letter next time. You might notice some similarities and some differences between the two letters if you read both letters. If you have time, that would be a useful study and help you in your understanding of these two talks. There is a key phrase that occurs in both letters, "walk in truth". It's in 2 John 4 and 3 John 3-4. To help us get an overview of these two letters, we could say that 2 John teaches us to walk in truth in our families and 3 John teaches us to walk in truth in our churches.

I have given an overall title to this little letter of "Healthy families". Families are of course important and I'd like to suggest to you some lessons we can learn about families from John's short note to this unnamed woman. My family has increased in size recently and we now have a lovely daughter. This privilege and gift has made me think hard about my family. How do I make sure my family is healthy? What values should my family hold? How can I guard my family against the influences of an unchristian world?

To help, I want to suggest five things that will characterise healthy families.

- In 2 John 1-2 let's notice that healthy families value friendship in the church;
- In 2 John 3-4 we see that healthy families value the Gospel;
- In 2 John 5-6 we learn that healthy families pursue love;
- 2 John 7-9 teach us that healthy families value the truth; and finally
- 2 John 10 and 11 remind us that healthy families guard against danger.

The lessons I've been helped by in studying this letter may well be very different to the lessons you take from this study as you will all be at different stages of your family lives. Some might be children, some parents, some grandparents. Some of you may be single, but I hope that whatever our stage of life the principles we see here may be helpful to us. So as we go into the chapter and try and look through the verses this morning let's keep in mind this over-riding theme that we are thinking about healthy families. By that I'm not interested in talking about healthy eating or active families or anything like that. They are important topics but not for me to deal with today. Surely it must be the desire of all of our hearts that our families, however big or however small, would function in a way that honours God and commends the Gospel.

Let's start then in 2 John 2:1-2. Healthy families value friendship in the church. John doesn't name himself at the start but refers to himself as "*the elder*" (2 John 1). If you read through commentaries on 2 John you will soon discover that there are plenty of guesses as to who the elect lady is! There are two main options. The first is that it is a specific individual. You would be able to find all sorts of interesting theories as to who this woman was but at best they are all guesses and most seem to require a fairly vivid imagination. The second option is that John is writing to a church and uses "*the elect lady*" (2 John 1) as some kind of code meaning church. The elect sister of 2 John 13 is then some sister congregation from another town. You would be able to find writers to support either of these two views and I think we must say that we don't really know and it doesn't really matter. It seems best to me to conclude that we don't need to know the identity of the woman written to but that it was written to an individual lady and her family. I don't think we need to assume John was writing to a church. You may prefer the other option. That's fine. But all I'll say today is built on assuming John is writing to a lady who really existed although we don't know her identity.

The first thing John says to this lady is that he loves her, and so do all the Christians who know her. Why do they love her? In 2 John 2 we read, "*because of the truth that is in us.*" There may have been all manner of differences between this woman and John and the believers he refers to. Some may have been from completely different social settings, had vastly different interests, had contrasting personalities and yet the truth that they held in common created a bond

between them that overpowered all of these natural differences between them and caused them to share an affection for each other. You see, the truth was stronger! Preferences may change over time, people may move away and distance separate friends but John is saying that the truth that he shares in common with this lady will endure forever and there will always be an affection between believers. John says that the truth "*abides in us*" (2 John 2). This reminds me that the Gospel that I claim to believe must really affect my life. So I have to ask the question: Is the Gospel changing me? Is the truth changing me? Is it changing you? Is the truth I believe causing me to love other Christians? Is it overcoming personality clashes between me and another believer? Do I let the truth change my attitudes and correct my faults?

John clearly valued this Christian woman and her children. We can learn that from 2 John 12-13 also when he says that he wants to visit to see them and passes on the greetings of the lady's nephews and nieces. Just as it's natural for families to care about each member of the family and value them, John reminds us that it's good to have friends in the church. It's good to value other believers and tell them that we value them. So as we leave this point let's ask ourselves the question, Do I value other believers in the church I attend? Do I value other Christians? Or do I think my family could be better going it alone? How good if I value other Christians and appreciate the help and encouragement they can be to me!

In 2 John 3-4 we see that healthy families value the Gospel. In some sense, 2 John 3 is just like a standard greeting but it contains really helpful truth for us. John says that "*grace, mercy and peace will be with you.*" He says that these gifts are from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father. This reminded me that in order for my family to be healthy we need to think about the things God has given us. The fact that John adds "*and the Lord Jesus Christ*" reminds us that all the blessings God gives us come through Christ and as a result of what He has done for us.

God has given us grace. He has given us grace in salvation. Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve. He gave us forgiveness and a position that we didn't deserve. Let's remember that God is always more good to us than we deserve. Healthy families remember, and think often about the grace Jesus has shown to us in becoming man in order to die for our sins. But John isn't just thinking about past evidences of grace. He says "*Grace ... will be with you*" 2 John 3. John reminds this lady that God continues to be gracious to her every day. He continues to give her good things she does not deserve. I need to remember to think often about the grace God shows to me each day. Healthy families remember how God has been gracious to them each day. As I think about ways in which God has shown grace to me, I must be challenged to show grace to my family. Do I do good for them even if they don't deserve it? If they have disappointed me or let me down, would I still go out of my way to show them kindness? Hasn't God shown me grace in exactly those kinds of circumstances? Doesn't He continue to do so every day? In the same way, I must try to show grace to my family. Healthy families have a good appreciation of God's grace to us and seek to show similar grace to each other.

God has shown me mercy in salvation. God has spared me the judgement I deserve. He hasn't punished me as He could have. But God shows me mercy every day! How often I do things that are wrong and deserve God's judgment and yet He shows me mercy. I need to get a grasp of that! Does my reflection upon the mercy God has shown to me make me a more merciful person? Am I merciful to my family if they fail? Can I show them kindness even when they have done wrong? Or do I rub in the mistakes they make and try to ensure they feel as bad as I think they should for what they've done? Doesn't God show me mercy in those circumstances every day? Surely I must show similar mercy if someone wrongs me? Do you remember the story Jesus told to illustrate this point. There was a man who owed a huge debt and couldn't repay. His master forgave him the debt and let him off completely. On the way home the forgiven man bumped into another man who owed him a much smaller debt. When this other man asked for leniency, the first man refused and threw the man in prison for defaulting on his debt. What an outrage! The first man had been forgiven a much greater debt and yet hadn't learnt to be merciful himself. See Matthew 18:21-35. Is my family one which celebrates the mercy we have been shown by God? Do we dwell on it often and think about how God has been merciful to us that day? Are we so affected by the mercy we have been shown that we can't help but be merciful to other people? Healthy families appreciate the mercy they have been shown and try to be merciful in their dealings with each other.

God has given me peace in salvation. The debt I owed God has been paid. I've been forgiven. I've been justified and declared to be right before God. I don't need to worry anymore about whether God has forgiven me or not. I don't need to fear death wondering whether or not I've done enough to be accepted by God. He has already accepted me because of what Christ has done. I am at peace with God. That's a daily comfort, not just a fact of something that happened when I was saved. Is my family characterised by that kind of peace? Do we often think about and rejoice in the peace that Jesus has won for us? What about in our relationships with each other? Do my family know that I love them and accept them? Or do they constantly live in doubt, wondering whether they have done enough to please me or earn my favour? Healthy families celebrate the peace brought by the Gospel.

Did you notice the little phrase at the end of 2 John 3: "*in truth and love*"? I think this is an important little phrase that adds context and meaning to the grace, mercy and peace we have been speaking about. You see, families

characterised by grace, mercy and peace will not necessarily avoid judgement or discipline. That would be to ignore the truth. It's important that my family abide by the truth and that we try to live it out in our lives. But this little phrase acts as a balance. In my quest to live out the truth I must do so in love. This means that any discipline must be tempered by my showing love. It's a warning to me about setting impossible standards for my family that they will constantly struggle to attain. Of course, I must stand for the truth and so must my family. But the balance of 2 John 3 reminds me that we are sinful and we will fail at times. In those times, perhaps particularly in those times, I must remember to act in love and remember grace, mercy and peace. I'm not to be legalistic in my attempts to live out the truth. My affection is not only to be linked to merit. Rather healthy families will be ones who love the Gospel, value grace, mercy and peace and try to express it in their family interactions.

In 2 John 4, John rejoices because he knows that some of this lady's children were walking in the truth. That really is a cause for celebration. How much do I rejoice in the spiritual progress of my friends' children? Christianity is no place for competition and I must never be jealous that someone else's children are "doing better" than mine spiritually. Instead, I can celebrate if there is evidence that God has been unbelievably gracious in saving one of my friends' children. I can celebrate that some young Christian is making some progress in their faith and becoming a little bit more like Christ. What an evidence of God's grace and it's right that we celebrate it! Is the Gospel a cause for celebration in my family? Do we rejoice to see its effects?

Some have suggested that the fact that 2 John 4 doesn't say "all your children" might mean that some of this Christian lady's children were not believers. This may or may not be true. We don't know. It may be that John had only met some of them. But if it is true it's just worth noticing that this lady is not criticised because all of her children are not saved. This mother is responsible to teach the truth to her children, and to be a living example of it. But it is God's role to save whom He chooses. That's an important lesson for me. I can't save my family and mustn't think that I can. I must teach my daughter the truth and try to live it out as an example to her. But if my family are saved, and of course I pray they will be, it will be down to God's grace and to that alone! This is just a gentle reminder not to be critical of parents who have some children who currently are not saved. It's not bad parenting. Instead, let's be families that celebrate when we do see evidences of God's saving grace and pray earnestly for each other and for children who are not yet saved.

Let's keep moving through this chapter and look at 2 John 5-6. The title we had for this section was healthy families pursue love. John encourages this lady, in fact he pleads with her, to "*love one another.*" Did you notice that he describes love as a command and not just a feeling or emotion? For a Christian to love another Christian is a matter of the will, not just a gushy kind of feeling. It's a practical thing. He says "*walk in it.*" The New Testament gives numerous examples of ways in which we can love one another. Do I follow them? Is my family characterised by an abundant love for each other? John also links love to the truth, "*we walk according to His commandments*" (2 John 6). It's not loving to ignore things that are wrong. In fact, I best show love to my family by putting into practice the things that Jesus said. Not primarily by buying flowers, romantic gestures or taking my kids to Disney World! Those things may be ways in which we express some of the commands in the Bible but they are not the essential expression of love to each other. So how do I encourage my family to pursue love? Perhaps some ways might include avoiding being critical of other believers, not gossiping or bad mouthing other Christians. That's not setting an example to my family to love those believers. I could always assume the best possible motives of people. Sometimes we can be so cynical and always think people have ulterior motives. That may or may not be true but I'm not showing much love if I always assume it. I could try to avoid spiteful grumbling about people. I could try to do kind things for other people. We could make cakes to give to other believers. That would teach my family to value other people and love them. Maybe we could visit friends in hospital together. Obviously these are just some examples. What your family does will no doubt be unique to your circumstances, but do you see my point? There is an abundance of practical ways in which we can encourage our families to show love to one another.

2 John 7-9 remind us that healthy families value the truth. John warns that there are deceivers around who teach false things about Jesus. In John's day, these were mainly people called Gnostics who denied that Jesus was really God's Son. They claimed some kind of God like spirit descended onto Jesus at His baptism and left Him just before He died. But it's not true. Jesus, the Son of God, really did come "*in the flesh*" *(2 John 7) as a man. Anyone who teaches false things about who Jesus was is a false teacher. John says worse than that. They are deceivers and antichrists. They were a sign that the people were living in last days. What was John's best advice for this Christian lady and her family? "*Look to yourselves*" (2 John 8). Don't lose what you already know. "*Abide in the doctrine of Christ*" (2 John 9) John's advice to this woman to ensure she didn't allow herself to be deceived by error was to tell her to learn the truth herself. Keep reminding herself of it! I think it is significant that this letter was written to a woman. It's vital that women know the truth! Of course it's vital that men know the truth as well, but I think that is more often assumed in our churches today. Some commentators assume the husband must have died or not been a Christian because, they say, if he were around he would have been given this instruction to look out for his family. That might be true, but I don't think it needs to be. It's just as vital that women know the truth as well as men. Do our churches promote this? Are we encouraging all of our people to know and love the truth? For this woman the advice was specially relevant. She needed to know the truth so she could not only guard herself but also her children. The more you know the truth the

more you will be able to protect your family and friends from deceivers who teach false things. How can you refute the false if you don't know the truth?

It's no good if my children see that mum and dad don't know the Bible and don't take a serious interest in trying to read it and learn it better and live out the things we learn. What message does that send? It's no good if children think mum doesn't know anything and they'll ask dad all the "spiritual" questions. A woman who knows the truth and abides in it is a blessing to her family and also more widely to the church. It's vital that all of us know the truth and abide in it.

So let me ask all of you, male or female, what are you doing to learn the truth? Clearly we're not all going to know everything the Bible says. None of us do. But how hard are we trying to get to know the truth better than we do at the moment. Healthy families value the truth. How can my family value the truth? How can yours? Here are some suggestions that are neither exhaustive, nor exclusive, but might be helpful. Could I have family discussions about spiritual things sometimes? Could we read the Bible together? Could I make more time to read the Bible on my own each day and think about what I read? Could we talk about how the Bible speaks to some situation my family goes through? Could we buy helpful commentaries to help us understand the Scriptures better? Could I find some helpful talks to listen to or articles to read in Christian magazines or websites? Could I find teaching meetings to attend? Could I write some questions down about the passages I read in a week and find some other believer to ask them about so I can learn? As you can see there are many suggestions. Could you try one or two of them? Clearly Bible knowledge on its own is not the aim, although it's certainly a good start - I don't know any good reason for not taking Bible study seriously. It's important to let what we learn affect our lives and change us. Is my family one that values the truth? Is yours?

The last section for us to consider is 2 John 10-11. Healthy families guard against danger. In addition to knowing the truth and abiding in it, John tells this lady to be careful whom she allows into her house. If there is someone who is teaching wrong things about who Jesus is then she is not even to let them into her house. She is not to say goodbye to them. If she did she would be sharing in their evil deeds. Hospitality is clearly an important part of Christianity. But in such serious cases this woman was not to show any hospitality at all. She was to have nothing to do with such serious error. Now clearly this is not the normal behaviour for us to adopt with anyone with whom we disagree. It's no reason for me to bar you from my house if you feel 2 John is really addressed to a church rather than an individual lady. We can disagree on that and still happily sit down and have dinner together. It might even be one of those occasions to sit down and discuss the truth together that we were just mentioning. But I have to guard to make sure that serious false teaching doesn't get a hearing in my house. How careful am I about what makes it into my house, whether that is from someone at the door, or something on the TV or the internet? Do I guard my family against false teaching about Jesus, from people claiming to be Christians? Will I be like this woman and protect my family and point them towards the truth and away from evil? Healthy families guard against danger.

2 John 12-13 also teach us that healthy families value presence in the church. John wanted to see this lady. He had more he wanted to say to her. But he wanted to say it face to face. That is generally good advice. If possible, it's much better to talk in person with someone. Words can be misconstrued in an e-mail or even over the phone. Much better to talk face to face! But John also says that he will have joy in seeing her. He clearly valued her company and looked forward to seeing her. Is that my attitude to the Christians in my church? Do I look forward to seeing them? Do I value their presence and miss them when I don't see them? Do I value face to face contact more than listening to an online sermon or reading a book? Is my family characterised by this? This Christian lady was obviously appreciated by her nieces and nephews who sent their greetings. I wonder what effect I have on other believers. Would they be pleased to see me and value my presence?

So then, healthy families walk in the truth, they value friendship in the church, they value the Gospel, they pursue love and love the truth, they guard against dangerous influences and value presence in the church. How healthy is my family? How healthy is yours? May the Lord bless these thoughts and help us as we try to live healthy lives, walking in the truth, celebrating the grace, mercy and peace that He has shown to us!

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