

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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The Ministries of Peter, Paul and John: The Ministry of John - The Family

Good morning and welcome to today's talk. Our subject today is the writings of John with particular focus on his reference to the family.

It is worth remembering at the outset that John was writing many years after the other New Testament writers, perhaps 85-90 AD many would suggest. Some even suggest as much as twenty years after Peter and Paul had ceased their earthly journey and gone to be with the Lord.

We have seen in the last two weeks, the ministry of Peter with its focus on the kingdom and of Paul in respect of the church but we see very powerfully in John a very intimate family focussed ministry.

It is also, therefore, fair to imagine that John may have been the youngest of the disciples and that makes his constant reference to himself as *"the disciple that Jesus loved"* (see John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20) all the more touching. Obviously, Jesus loved all the disciples equally but this tells us that John had a deep appreciation for the Lord's love for him personally, understanding that if he had been the only disciple, or indeed, even the only person alive, Jesus would have loved him. It reminds me of Paul's words when writing to the Galatians. In Galatians 2:20 he finishes the verse by saying *"... the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*

In John's Gospel and his three epistles, he talks about relationships between a father and a son, mother and children, also messages to fathers, sons, children and even very young children. The most important part of his writings, however, is to bring to our attention that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of the eternal God. It is in this way that he begins his Gospel. The first three Gospels written by Matthew, Mark and Luke are what are known as "synoptic". This means they are written around a sequence of events presented in such a way that they bring out the particular writer's view of the Lord Jesus.

John's Gospel, though still recording some of the events included in the other Gospels, and even adding others, is much less historical. His primary objective is to present the Person of Christ: he declares it in John 20:31, *"But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name."*

John brings us into the knowledge of the divine family and how that, through faith in Christ, we can be brought into this wonderful position. He begins his writings by talking about life and light (see John 1:1-9) and then in chapter three of his Gospel he brings before us the love of God in the most well-known and most translated verse in all of Scripture, John 3:16 *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."*

So, let us start at the beginning. Not just any beginning but as John describes in his Gospel in John 1:1. It is worth noticing that he also begins his first epistle by talking about the beginning (see 1 John 1:1) and also the book of Genesis starts with the words *"In the beginning..."* So what is the difference? Are these all referring to the same time? No, they are three very different times in history. John in his first epistle is referring to the beginning of the Lord's life in this world. *"That which we have heard, seen, looked upon and handled"* as he puts it in 1 John 1:1. In Genesis 1 we are going back to the creation of the world and surely nothing can go back any further? John in his Gospel, however, as inspired by the Holy Spirit, takes us back a lot further, indeed infinitely further back, to eternity itself which has no beginning. This is something which is well beyond our imagination and which we can only believe through faith rather than try to understand. It is here that we must begin our consideration of the divine family because it is here that this family relationship already existed. That relationship had no beginning and will have no end and we as weak, poor sinful mortals can be brought into the blessing of it. What grace!

Let me start with a very basic example of something we will all understand. If I meet someone I have never met before, I can decide how much or how little of myself I let them see. Indeed, if I want I can portray myself as being something completely different to what I actually am. We can be one thing in one situation and something else in another. However, my children will let you know exactly what I am really like! So, if you want to know me, ask one of my children!! Imagine if we wanted to meet Her Majesty the Queen. We would have very little chance unless, of

course, she decided she wanted to meet us. Then if she commissioned her son to go out and find us and make the introduction, then the situation would be quite different. We see this perhaps when one of the Queen's children marry and someone who previously through birth had no claim to be there is brought into the Royal Family. It is this very scenario that John wants to bring to our attention: that through knowing God the Son we can be brought into the divine family and know God the Father!

I must stress, however, one huge weakness in these examples that I have just given. That is that God the Father and God the Son together with God the Holy Spirit are all one while distinct, whereas my son and I, while very alike, are not one. God the Son is eternal in His existence, divine in His nature and distinct in His personality.

So, in the person of the Son, God the Father has chosen to reveal Himself to bring us into the divine family. It is this that John primarily is given by divine inspiration to bring to our attention. He therefore begins his Gospel by telling us about a time when nothing else existed apart from the wonderful triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we see the Lord as the King and the perfect Man respectively, so therefore we are given His genealogies through His earthly parents. In the Gospel of Mark, He is shown as the perfect Servant so no genealogy is given and in John's Gospel there can be no earthly genealogy for the One who is the Son of God.

In the Old Testament we see how God showed Himself as holy, righteous, faithful and true but He is not revealed as Father until the Son comes. In John's Gospel we see the increasingly apparent objective of the teaching of Jesus that He should introduce His followers into the knowledge of the Father for themselves. A climax of this is reached at the close of the prayer of John 17 when Jesus says, "*And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them*" (John 17:26). Then in John 20:17 He sends the message by Mary: "*Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father...*"

In John 14:6 the Lord Jesus clearly states, "*I am the way, the truth and the life; no man comes to the Father but through me.*" Notice, this is not just coming to God, but coming to the Father. The Apostle John is not satisfied that we come to a knowledge of God then leave it at that. He wants us to be brought into this close relationship of knowing the mighty, all powerful Creator God as our Father. This should therefore affect each and every aspect of our lives as we seek to live as pleasing our heavenly Father in the same way that it is only right and acceptable in normal circumstances that children should reverence and seek to please their earthly parents.

As we consider earthly parents, it is worth remembering at this point that as the Lord was dying on the cross while enduring extreme suffering, He could look down and see His mother Mary standing with other women (John 19:26). This was a period in time when it was very difficult for an elderly woman on her own to survive and we must assume that by this point Joseph had died. So the Lord, in spite of His own terrible suffering, considers His mother and, as He looks down He sees the young disciple, John standing near (John 19:26). What an impression it must have left on this young man who had left his own father's fishing business and followed the Lord now to see this wonderful example of family care. The Lord then commits His mother into the care of John to look after as his own mother (John 19:27). This is a great lesson to us all to ensure we are looking after our parents and being mindful, too, of others who have nobody to look after them.

So as being brought into the blessing of the divine family and knowing God as our Father, it doesn't just finish with responsibility for our own earthly families. We now have brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world. John touches on some of these relationships in his epistles. We have thought about how we are brought to enjoy eternal life through belief on the Son but another of John's great themes is light. In his first epistle, he refers to his "little children" (see 1 John 2:1, 2:1, 2:13, 2:18, 2:28, 3:7, 3:18, 4:4, 5:21), a lovely touch showing the way in which he viewed the believers for whom he had a heart of love in his pastoral care. As we seek to meet and work together in the Lord's service, there will always be little things that arise but if we seek to resolve these things in the same way as we do with members of our own families, how many difficulties we may avoid. So, in this regard we are to "*walk in the light*" (1 John 1:7). John seems to emphasise that it is not how we walk but where we walk, that is in the light.

John talks in black and white, no shades of grey. We live in a day where there seems to be shades of grey and uncertainty in everything and everywhere we see, but not with John. As children of God we need to encourage and strengthen ourselves in the unshakeable promises of our heavenly Father. We have already seen how that those who have the Son have life and now we see that we walk in the light not in the darkness. So as those who are in the light there should be that which marks us as walking in that light. In fact, he says if we continue in darkness then we are liars and don't have the truth (1 John 1:6). Many things in this world are darkness as far as God is concerned and we should not walk in them. What does this really mean? It is clear from what we have already seen that anything that seeks to put forward anything other than the Son to bring us into the blessing of God is darkness.

In 1 John 1:8-2:2 John then brings to our attention a very important aspect of teaching that can so easily upset and distract the people of God and that is sin. He states that "*if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves*" (1 John 1:8) and if we say we have not sinned we make God a liar (1 John 1:10). The epistle to the Romans tells us that "*all have*

sinned" (Romans 3:23). So, although those who have accepted Christ as Saviour and Lord have been forgiven of their sins past, present and future, there still also needs to be an awareness that, while sin should not be the thing that marks our daily life, there may be times when we fall into sin and there has been provision made for this. We are told in 1 John 2:1 that *"we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."* This simply means we have someone who acts and pleads for us in the presence of God the Father. This reminds me of the wonderful hymn,

*"Before the throne of God above,
I have a strong and perfect plea".*

CL Bancroft (1841-1923)

In our earthly families, how happy it is when the children "behave themselves". So it is in the divine family when we, as little children, follow in the instructions that John gives us. *"If we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us"* (see 1 John 1:9) and the relationship is restored.

As well as to emphasise these relationships within the divine family, another important reason for John to write his epistles is to address those who had come in to the church seeking to destroy it. He uses the strongest language possible to show how dangerous it is to deny the very basis of the faith, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God come in flesh. Christ means 'God's anointed King'. How sad that in our day it has become a word of blasphemy! The most important, powerful name in all of creation taken blasphemously on the lips of those who will one day be subject to His righteous judgement seems extraordinary. John emphasises this by referring to these people as antichrists (see 1 John 2:18) and liars (1 John 2:22).

Very few will deny that a man named Jesus lived approximately 2,000 years ago, but these men were denying that He was "the Christ". John says that they therefore do not have the Father and that his little children should not be seduced by them. So, let us in our day have the same diligence to ensure we are not ensnared by those who still come and say the same untruths. It is interesting to note that this particular instruction is to the "little children" but we all do well to be aware of this. This term for 'little children' here seems to be different to the general term with which he refers to all those under his pastoral care. Here we have more the thought of being spiritually immature. How easy it is for those young in the faith to be misguided and turned aside.

John mentions the fathers as those who have known Him who was from the beginning and the young men as those who are strong and have overcome the wicked one. He then gives them instruction to ensure they do not love the world and the things that are it. This again is something that we all need to be very aware of as it is less obvious than those who deny Christ as the Son but it is nevertheless just as dangerous and can easily ruin our Christian walk. He mentions three aspects of the world that first reared their head in the garden of Eden and have been wrecking lives ever since. They are the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). How often do things go wrong because we felt something, we saw something and we felt that in some way we were entitled to it!

In John's second epistle he continues to emphasise the need for the truth of Christ come in the flesh. It is interesting to notice to whom this letter is written: *"the elect lady and her children"* (2 John 1). There are various views as to what this means. Is it a person or is he referring to a church and those who meet there? Various reasons have been put forward for both views but it is not a matter of great importance and it is perhaps simplest just to read it as a personal letter. It may well be that there are no names mentioned to ensure particular people or churches are not singled out for persecution. However, whichever is the case, the sentiment of John is still powerful and that is that he rejoiced greatly in the fact that these children are *"walking in the truth"* (2 John 4). It should be the desire of each and every one of us who hold the truth of God that those of our "children", whether our natural children or others under our care, are also found walking in the truth. This can only be done by two things, teaching and living out the truth. So, our responsibility is initially to our own children, then to the children of God in our local fellowship, then finally widening out to all the family of God.

In this short letter, John once again gives very straight and unequivocal instruction as to how we should deal with those who deny Christ come in flesh. We are not to invite them into our house or bid them God's speed (2 John 10). This seems harsh language from someone with so much love in his heart and with a desire to encourage us in the family of God. It underlines the fundamental importance of holding the truth of all that John has brought to our attention so far. We have thought a lot about light and life and love and now perhaps truth is more to the fore. It is clear from John's writings that all four of these things are vital if we are to have *"full joy"* as he refers to it in 1 John 1:4. We need to ensure that all these things are held and shown in equal measure.

When we come to John's third epistle, we then see another change in the one addressed, the well-beloved Gaius (3 John 1). My first thought here is that this is a wonderful way to address a brother in Christ. The Lord could say when He was here that by the way His people loved each other, others would know that they were His disciples (see John 13:34-35). It is little surprise therefore that with this attitude it could be said that these early Christians *"turned the*

world upside down" (see Acts 17:6). How much the world we live in now still needs this type of love shown! Again, like the second epistle we are not told why he wrote to an individual but it is very probable from what he goes on to say that perhaps if he had written it to a particular church it may have been suppressed by Diotrephes (3 John 9-10). Like the second epistle also (2 John 4), he begins by telling Gaius how much he is encouraged by the fact that he is holding and "*walking in the truth*" (3 John 3-4).

We then have these two people brought before us, Diotrephes and Demetrius (3 John 9-12). Their names are very similar and we could easily get them confused but they are completely opposite in their character. This should be a reminder to us to aim to be like one of them and avoid being like the other. The former was full of his own importance and sought to lord this over the children of God (3 John 9-10). The latter, by contrast, was filled with the truth and had a good testimony from all people (3 John 12). If we hold these precious truths that John has brought to our attention and then seek to work them out in our lives, then surely our legacy will be that of Demetrius and not Diotrephes.

May the Lord help us to appreciate more the wonder of the fact that we have been brought into the family of God and so enable us to be a blessing to our fellow members in His family.

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