

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, June 14, 2015**

TRUTH AND LOVE

2 John 1-13

Any of you who have been in classes that I've taught or groups that I've led studying the Bible know that I tend to spend a long time going through them. My Sunday School class, for instance, just spent a year and a half on Revelation. It is not true that I once spent a year on the Book of Obadiah. It was only six months. But nevertheless, you'll be surprised to know that, as I preach for four of the next six weeks while Pastor Neil is in Israel and then later in July recovering from knee replacement surgery, we will go through not one, not two, but three entire books of the Bible. I know that's next to impossible to believe and you're probably asking yourselves right now how is it that I can get through Genesis, Isaiah and Luke in four sermons? Well, the answer is not by looking at them. Instead, I'd like for us to focus our attention on three of the neglected books of the New Testament. I'd like for us to take a look first, this morning, at 2 John, next week at 3 John, and then for two weeks in July, the 12th and the 19th, at Jude, each of which is just one chapter and each of which together have a unified message that we desperately need to hear in the times that we live in. These books have no business being neglected. So we're going to take a look at them over the next six weeks.

2 John is short, one chapter, just 13 verses including the opening greeting and the conclusion. It is about truth and it's about love and it's about the need for Christians to embody and uphold both. Not one or the other, but both. The letter is from John the Apostle, who in the very first verse calls himself simply "the elder." The word that's used there is *presbyteros*, so we know that the Apostle John was a good Presbyterian. Good to know. And he addresses this letter to either a Christian woman and her children or to a church and its members. He writes, "The elder to the chosen lady and her children." Scholars disagree about which it is. It's really impossible to tell with certainty which it is. Personally I believe that he's writing to a church and that this form of address is a way of shielding them from suspicion by the authorities if, unfortunately, this letter had been intercepted. So he doesn't name them as a church. He certainly doesn't say where they are. But instead he refers to them as the chosen lady and her children, which given the fact that the church is so often referred to using feminine nouns in the New Testament – we refer to the church as "she" – to call her the chosen lady makes good sense and of course we are all her children. But whether it's a church or person, she is referred to as "chosen" – *eklekta* – which means "elect." Once again we know that they're good Presbyterians, talking about the elect. They are designated specifically by God for membership in His household and kingdom. That's what is meant there by "chosen." You who have been selected by God to be His children. You did not choose Him. He chose you, as John says in his first letter.

So that's who it's from, that's who it's to, and in verses 1-3 we see truth and love inextricably linked. "The elder to the chosen lady and her children whom I love, not in the abstract or because of their great personal qualities or because we work together. I

love them,” he says, “in the truth.” In the truth. That is, they know the gospel. They know the gospel not simply as a touchy, feely thing. They know the gospel as a message, as good news. Admittedly the news today often is neither good nor news. But they know. They know this as good. They know it as something good, and as something wonderful that is done for humanity. They know it, too, as a message, as truth, as something that needs to be proclaimed. It’s not just something that’s felt. It’s something that’s known. He knows them in the truth of the gospel and in particular in the truth of the gospel that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior and the incarnate Son of God. The message is not primarily or first about us. The message of the good news first and foremost is about Christ. It’s about who He is, it’s about what He has done, it’s about what He requires. It’s only once we know that that we know ourselves, that we know our needs, that we know what we’re commanded. So he knows these people, even as the Lord knows us and even as we know one another, in the truth. And the elder loves them as family members. And beyond that, he extends this past the lady and her household or past the church and its members to all Christians. He says, “to the chosen lady and her children whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth.” All who know the truth. Together they know one another in Christ, in the gospel, in the message of salvation, in the message of who God is and what He has done.

So not this week, but the following week we will be gathering, some of us will be going down to Orlando, FL, so that we can go to Disney World. No, I have no desire to go to Disney World. Never have. This is purely coincidence that it happens to be in the same town. We’re not going down there to meet Mickey Mouse. We’re going down there to join with brothers and sisters from 500 other churches across America. Most of those brothers and sisters we’ve never met. They’re going to be from churches some of which we’ve never even heard of. We didn’t know that they were part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. We won’t know that till we get down there because, unlike some people, we don’t obsessively look through the information at the back of the commissioner’s handbook or on the website to see who all the churches are. We haven’t taken account of which one joined last week, which one joined in April, which one joined back in January. That continues to happen. We continue to receive new churches into the EPC. But when we gather we won’t just be an institutional body. This isn’t a shareholders’ meeting, where people come together to make decisions about how the corporation should be run and how we can maximize our profits. There is an element of that in that we’re trying always to listen to God to hear ever better what our mission is and to improve the ways that we do that mission, and that involves a certain amount of human decision-making, obviously. But if you’ve ever been to a General Assembly – Presbytery meetings are like this as well – its’ amazing how much the focus is on worshipping God and fellowship with brothers and sisters, many of whom you’re meeting for the first time. How is that possible? It’s possible because we are all members of the same household in the truth. And I’d go even farther than that. All those who are in the truth, whether they are Catholic or Eastern Orthodox or Lutherans or Episcopalian, even Baptists. Anyone who is in the truth is part of this household. And we are to love them as much as we love the person we had breakfast with this morning.

So he writes to the chosen lady, he says that he loves her and her children in the truth. All of those elsewhere love them as well because this is a mutual thing, it goes back and forth, because of the truth which lives in us and will be with us forever. This binding of us is not just about the fact that we happen to believe the same things. Let's be clear about that. When he talks about the truth and he talks about loving one another in the truth, what I think he's making clear is that this is not just about happening to hold the same ideology or the same perspective on things. All Republicans may feel the same way about taxes. All Democrats may feel the same way about abortion. I don't know. Pick an issue. But that doesn't mean all Republicans love one another or all Democrats love one another. As a matter of fact if you've ever had contact with people who work in political parties you know how untrue that statement is. Shared ideology doesn't guarantee that you're going to actually like the people that you work with on issues. It certainly doesn't guarantee that you would lay down your life for them. As a matter of fact, once again, anyone who works in politics knows that the guy next to you may be of the same political party, may have the same ideological stance in the world and he will gladly lay down your life for his ambition. The church is different because it's not just about a theological structure. It's about the personal relationships we have with God and with one another. John says in his first letter that God is love. He says in his gospel that God is the truth. Jesus is called, in the very first verse of John's gospel, the Word, the Message, the Gospel, the Truth. And our redeemed person as Christians would reflect both of those realities, would reflect both that God is truth and that God is love. And so we extend love to one another in the truth, not because we're members of the same political party, not because we're members of the same institution, not because we're members of the same church, but because we are members of the same household.

So the greeting concludes by tying truth and love together. He says, "Grace, mercy and peace will be ours as long as we hold these two together." And sadly, we all know that there are churches, both local congregations and whole denominations – as a matter of fact, the Christian church as a whole – who have not done a very good job of holding these two things together. Some would dispense with truth and claim that they can still love one another, except at that point they are loving one another because of what they can do for one another or what they can do together. Some think that you can dispense with love as long as you hold onto truth, which is why at one point there were 737 different Presbyterian denominations, or some such number, because we have to make sure that every jot and tittle is agreed to and if it's not then we can walk apart. As a matter of fact we can not only walk apart but we can anathematize anybody who disagrees with us on any of those jots and tittles. I've told my Sunday School class my all-time favorite name for a denomination is the "Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Double-Predestinarian Baptists." They could have been Presbyterians. It just so happens that they were Congregationalists but "Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Double-Predestinarian" have a very peculiar way of understanding the Calvinist idea of predestination but they insisted that they were the only ones who got it right. And as you might imagine – well let's just find out. How many of you, other than those of you in my Sunday School class who just heard this a couple of weeks ago, ever heard of this group? See, there you go. You have never read Frank Mead's Handbook of Denominations in the United States. However, you have to read one of the early editions of that. That group doesn't appear in the later

editions because they've died out. When you essentially say, "We don't want to have anything to do with anyone who doesn't agree with us on absolutely everything," eventually you wind up with one lonely guy who some day is going to kick the bucket and when he does there are no more Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Double-Predestinarian whatever's. So you can't dispense with truth, you can't dispense with love. They have to go together.

Now, he goes on to say that Christians are to uphold the truth in love. Verse 4: "It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth just as the Father commanded us." Walking in the truth. That's a great expression because it indicates that holding to the truth is not simply a matter of believing the right things in your head. It's also got to be about action. If you actually believe the truth you're going to live that truth. We don't generally do stuff that we don't believe is right and good and true. Even stuff that some part of us may believe is wrong, somehow or another we'll find a way to justify it, right? You've no doubt heard people say, "Well, you know, the Nazis weren't all bad. They made the trains run on time." Well, that's fine. I'm glad the trains ran on time. That doesn't justify anything. It's simply a piece of random information that doesn't actually affect anything. And in the same way if we know that something is true we're called to live it out. We're called to live it out because walking in the truth is not an option to which we can say, "Well, if that's convenient, if that's profitable, if that's fun, if that's pleasurable, then I'll do that, otherwise no, I don't think I will." No, the Father has *commanded* that.

In John's day, sad to say, as in ours, there were those who thought that truth was inconsequential. The argument goes something like this: "It's not possible to know everything about God." We agree with that, right? God is infinite, we're limited. That by itself means we can never fully understand Him. You start with that and then you move to, "And the Bible is ambiguous in places." Well that's also true. There are places in Scripture that are not as clear as others and so there's a dispute about what they mean. Now here's the leap: "Therefore Christian teaching should be ignored and we should work together in mission." But here's the problem: How do we know what the mission is unless we agree about the truth upon which it is based? How do we do that? Some folks would say that we shouldn't evangelize because all religions eventually lead to God. That way of conceiving of our mission is based on a falsehood. It's based on the falsehood that all religions lead to God. It's also based on the falsehood that we can simply ignore the commands that are in the New Testament. And thus, that way of carrying out our mission is invalid. But there are those who would say to this church or to other local churches or to other American denominations, "No, you shouldn't be evangelizing." It's as if we tried to boil water at sea-level based on the belief that water boils at 125 degrees. How long would it take you to boil water at 125 degrees? Come on, folks, you all graduated from high school. How long does it take? It would never happen! You can't do it! Water doesn't boil at 125 degrees at sea-level. It doesn't matter how sincerely you believe that. It doesn't matter if it makes you feel good to believe that. I have no idea why it would, but there are lots of strange people in the world. That doesn't make a difference because it's not true. If one is to walk and if one

is to walk with brothers and sisters in unity, then it's necessary to walk in the truth because the walk is determined by the truth.

And then the new command that he gives is connected to what he just said. We are to love one another because we are connected by the truth. Verse 5 says, "Now, dear lady, I'm not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another." You remember the *new command* that Jesus spoke of in John on the night of His betrayal. He says in John 13: "I give you a new command. You are to love one another." In one sense it wasn't a new command. The command for the Israelites to love one another is given in Leviticus and elsewhere. But this is a command specifically for the followers of Christ. If we are part of the same household we are to love one another. And this he says in verse 6: "This is love. That we walk in obedience to His commands. As you have heard from the beginning, His command is that you walk in love." So he starts verse 4, he says, "Walk in the truth." He ends verse 6, "Walk in love." The crucial thing is that when you walk, walk in both. And you walk in the commands of God particularly in order that that love might be made concrete.

It's all fine and good for me to say to Maryanne, "I love you." That's great. That's wonderful. She likes to hear that. That's fine. If when she asks me to do something for her I ignore her, if when I see that she has a need I don't pay any attention to it, if when I see an opportunity to do something for her that she wasn't expecting and I pass it by, in any of those circumstances I send a message which is, "I love you about this deep." It's just on the surface. When you really get to the nature of our relationship, if that's the circumstance, if that's what happens, we're roommates and we happen to have a piece of paper that says we're married. That's all there is. I'm not saying I'm a perfect husband. Can I have an amen for that? I'm not saying I do all of those things all the time. But if I never do them, I'm not walking in love. And if I'm not walking in love, then the statement that I make that is meant to embody truth, "I love you," is of questionable validity if not being outright false.

Now, having laid out all of this, John goes on to say something that for our day may sound a bit surprising. Normally in our day we just leave it at that. But John goes on to say some rather harsh things. Beginning in verse 7 he says, "Many deceivers who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist" The deceivers are those who deny that Christ has come in a real human body. That may sound like an odd thing but in those days there was a subset of the Gnostic heresy called the Docetists who believe that the material world is evil so Christ couldn't have taken on a material nature through the incarnation so He had to be a phantom, He had to be an illusion. People only *thought* that He was flesh and blood, only *thought* that it was a real body that was crucified on the cross, only *thought* that it was a real body that rose from the dead. This was actually all an illusion, an accommodation to our fallen material nature.

Today the problem is different. Today the problem is much more another form, something called "ebionitism," which says that there's nothing more than the human, nothing more than the material and the fleshly about Jesus. But they both have the same

root problem, which is believing that spirit and matter have nothing to do with one another. That's the origin of modern materialism. All there is is matter. There is no spirit, much less them having anything to do with one another. That's the origin of modern hedonism, the idea that I can essentially do anything I want, especially in sexual terms. I can do anything I want because the body doesn't really matter, only the spirit matters. That's all a form of the heresy he's talking about. And what does he say about those people? "Well, they're wrong, that's unfortunate, we disagree, but we can still work together on mission." No, he doesn't say that. He says, "The person who so teaches is the deceiver and the antichrist." In the New International Version that's not capitalized and that's good. He's not talking about the Antichrist that's referred to in Revelation, that comes at the end of time. He's referring to anyone at any time, any point of history who says this about Christ. They're against Him. They've rejected the message and they're not part of the household. And that's the crucial thing. They're not part of the household.

He says in verse 8, "Watch out that you do not lose what you've worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully." Don't be fooled by these people. Don't be fooled by their message and do not, for the sake of a false unity, allow them to go around deceiving people. What they do out in the world, that's another story. I can't stop Joel Osteen from being on television. But if Joel Osteen were to come to me and say, "I'd like to preach at your church," I'd say, "You've got to be kidding! The message that you preach is not the gospel. It only resembles it superficially and therefore you have no business telling the people that I shepherd falsehoods. And I would be a bad shepherd, a neglectful shepherd, an unloving shepherd if I let you do that." This isn't the spirit that dominates the modern American church, is it? The spirit of the modern American church says, "Well, why can't we all just get along? Why can't we work together on mission even though we disagree?" That's not John's message. He's not saying, "Be like the Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Double-Predestinarian Baptists and you have to agree on every single thing that you can possibly conceive of, including what color the grapes have to be in your communion juice." He's not talking about that. He's talking about the heart of the gospel. Those who do not acknowledge Jesus as coming in the flesh, that's right at the heart of the message that we give to the world. Those he calls deceivers, liars. And he calls them antichrists, hostile to God. And he warns them against them. And he warns them against them to the point where he does something that's hard to believe, given the culture that he lived in. He says in verse 10, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work." In those days, say what you want about any of a number of sins, in some ways one of the greatest of sins was to not extend hospitality. And it's still the case in many places in the Middle East. To be hospitable to friends, to neighbors, to strangers, is a high, high calling and you only refuse it under the direst of circumstances and that's what John is talking about. He's saying when someone comes proclaiming another message, a false gospel, turn from them, do not welcome them to your pulpit, do not welcome them to teach your Sunday School class, do not give them the opportunity to propagate their falsehood.

That's the case with the message of the secular world. I think it's fair to say that everyone here would be really puzzled if they heard that Pastor Neil had invited Richard Dawkins to come and to talk to us about evolution and atheism on a Sunday morning, right? Well, John says that message applies within the church as well. The reason is simple: It's because neither truth nor love is served by ignoring differences that go to the heart of the gospel. Love is served by speaking and walking together in truth. Truth is served by acting in love. And both, inextricably linked, are best served if God and His call, His commandments, His mission, and His revelation are put first. The modern world, the modern church doesn't particularly want to hear that. That's why I don't give you their message this morning. I give you the message of the Word of God.