

The Two Lost Sons

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[0 : 00] First, I want to establish what is going on in this passage. So where are we in the story? What's going on in Ephesus? And what is the problem?

And then secondly, once we've established what the problem is, I want to ask, but is it really a problem? Obviously, there are people who have very different opinions about God and about the world to ourselves.

But is that really an issue? And if it is an issue, why? Why would it be an issue? And then after that little interrogation, we're going to close with some encouragement and maybe a challenge.

So first, we're going to ask, what's the problem here? Then, is it really a problem? And if it is, why is it a problem? And then encouragement.

So lots of problems. So let's just jump into it. What's going on here? Well, we know from what we've read in 1 John so far, from what Neil and James have said over the last couple of weeks, that John is writing to the church in Ephesus.

[1 : 11] And he's writing to warn them about a group of people who John says are teaching and preaching lies. And now today, in verse 19, here we learn that these people, and we're going to call them visiting teachers, these visiting teachers used to be a part of the church community in Ephesus.

But because of what they believed, and because it was so different from what the rest of the church believed, these visiting teachers, they decided to leave the church.

And in fact, in verse 19, John tells us that what they believed was so radically different, that actually, they did not really belong to us.

That actually, they were never truly a part of the church in Ephesus. They were never truly Christians. So what was it? What was this radical belief that these people had?

Now, there's not simply one part of John's letters that we can go to, to work out who they were or what they believed. But as you read through the letters as a whole, you start to paint a picture.

[2 : 25] And at the center of this picture is verse 22. Who is the liar, John says? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ.

So John tells us that these visiting teachers, the ones he's warning the church about, that they deny that Jesus is the Christ. They deny that Jesus, God's son, who was both God and man, they deny that he died for our sin.

They deny that he died for our sin and died to join us to God, join us in a relationship with our heavenly father.

So according to these visiting teachers, Jesus was an unnecessary extra in their faith. They believed many of the things that we do. They believed in God. They believed in sin.

They believed in good and in evil. But as far as they were concerned, they didn't need Jesus because they already claimed to know God. They already claimed to be in a relationship with God.

[3 : 33] They already claimed to be sinless. So Jesus wasn't important to their faith. And so they just kind of dropped him. They just kind of took him out of the faith.

They didn't like him. They kept the bits they liked. They got rid of the bits that they didn't. And this is what makes John really upset.

This is what prompts him to write the letter because there comes a point where if you start removing things from the Christian faith, that it falls apart.

That actually you lose everything. Kirsten and I have been on holiday this week. We haven't been anywhere. We've just been hanging around. And a couple of days ago, we went to McDonald's because one of the things we like to do when we're on holiday is eat junk food.

And did you know that when you go to McDonald's and you order a burger, that you can customize that burger? So what you do is you go to the touchscreens.

[4 : 36] This is a top tip. Go to the touchscreens at McDonald's and you can add or remove things from your burger. So get this. You can order a cheeseburger, but a cheeseburger without the bun or without the meat or without the lettuce or without the sauce.

So you can order a cheeseburger and just get a slice of cheese in a box. Right? No joke. I'm serious. A little cheaper. Now, there surely comes a point, though, where when you've removed so many things from that burger, that it's not a burger anymore.

Right? It's just a slice of cheese in a box. Well, if you take things out of Christianity, something very similar happens.

Because if you take Jesus out of Christianity, I mean, I don't know what you've got then, but you've not got Christianity. If you take Jesus out of the Christian faith, you're left with nothing.

You lose everything. Which is why, in verse 22 here, John calls these visiting teachers antichrists.

Now, what is an antichrist?

[5 : 49] Or who is the antichrist? Donald Trump? Anyone? Some people think he's the antichrist. Or perhaps our very own Boris Johnson.

Well, no, John isn't talking about Trump or about Boris. And thankfully, he tells us exactly what he is talking about. Because who is the liar, John says? So verse 22 again.

It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist, denying the Father and the Son. So these visiting teachers who deny that Jesus is the Christ are antichrists.

That is, they are antichrist. Opposing Christ. Anti-Christian. Anti-Jesus.

Now, I'm going to come out and say it before you think it. That doesn't mean that anyone who doesn't believe in Jesus is an antichrist.

[6 : 53] That's not true. And I think in today's culture, that's not helpful or nice to say or think. No, John is using this term antichrist specifically here for these visiting teachers.

These teachers who have come from the church, who know the truth about Jesus, who know the importance of Jesus, and who yet reject him, who are seeking to lead other people away from Jesus.

So John doesn't pull any punches here. He knows how dangerous these teachers are and how life-shattering what their teaching is.

And he writes in verse 23, no one who denies the Son has the Father. If you deny that Jesus is the Christ, you deny yourself fellowship with God the Father.

If you don't have and trust in Jesus, you can't have God and what he offers. If you take Jesus out, you lose everything.

[8 : 12] So John writes to the church in Ephesus to warn them, don't be deceived by these lies of the visiting teachers. Rather, he says in verse 24, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you.

If it does, you will also remain in the Son and in the Father. He says, hold on to the truth about Jesus. Hold on to what you know.

Now, we're going to come back to this, and we're going to come back to the Antichrist in a minute, because there's a little bit more going on here. But before we do, let's just stop and ask ourselves, on the basis of what we know, is this really a problem?

I mean, we've established what John says the issue is, that there are some people who think differently from the church.

There are some people who think differently from ourselves. They have different beliefs than we do. And here they are, attempting to share their faith with others.

[9 : 25] Is that an issue? We live in a time and a place where it's not okay to comment on someone else's beliefs or on someone else's religious views.

In our culture, it's an unwritten rule that providing you're not hurting anyone, and providing you mainly keep it to yourself, that you can believe what you want.

So all religions and all beliefs are equally right and valid today. And if you say otherwise, well, you're probably a bigoted, arrogant, intolerant, negative Nancy.

But is that true? In this passage, is John just being some sort of narrow-minded pleb? Is his warning not to be led astray and his encouragement to remain in the truth, is it right?

Is it true that all religions and beliefs are equally true and valid? Well, behind that statement, there's a couple of assumptions.

[10:37] And the biggest assumption being that all religions basically believe the same thing, or that what they believe doesn't really matter at all. But let's take the first one first, because the difficulty with the assumption that all religions basically believe the same thing is that when you compare these beliefs side by side, well, they don't all agree with each other.

For example, if you take some of the world's largest religions, they have very different views on who God is and on how we relate to God. So take Buddhism, for example.

Buddhists don't believe in a personal God. And Buddhism is about freeing oneself from desire, which leads to a world of suffering and unhappiness.

And you do this, you free yourself through a series of steps and meditations, leaving one's sense of self behind and elevating to enlightenment, a state of freedom and happiness, a state of nirvana.

So in contrast to Christianity, then, if Buddhism is about extinguishing oneself into the ultimate oneness of reality, then Christianity is the total opposite.

[12:01] Because Christianity is all about a personal God who invites individual people into a personal relationship with himself.

So they couldn't be any more different. Now, unlike Buddhists, Muslims do believe in a God. But for the vast majority of Muslims, the Islamic God is not a personal and relational God.

Rather, he is an utterly transcendent God. And the Islamic God, he can and he does love his creatures, but he is not primarily a God of love.

He is primarily a God whose supreme will must be submitted to. And this is very different from what Christianity teaches God is like.

Because the Christian God, I mean, yeah, he's transcendent. He's utterly holy and pure. But he is love. And at the heart of the Christian message is God making an appeal of love.

[13:07] An appeal that through faith in his son, Jesus, through faith in Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, that we can be united too, in fellowship with, made sons and daughters of God.

And we can share in all the benefits of being God's children. Now, can I just say that I am a firm believer in religious freedom.

So you, no matter who you are, you are welcome to believe whatever you want. And I will still call you a friend. And I'm glad, I'm glad that we can have these discussions, we can have these conversations, and that we can disagree respectfully.

I'm glad that we can talk about these things and still love one another. Because the idea that all religions are equally true and valid, it can't be true.

Because they all believe different things. They all have very different world views. So which one is it? Which one is true?

[14:18] And does it matter if any of them are true or false? Well, obviously, I think it matters. And I stand here on the side of Christianity.

And there's a reason for that. The Christian faith, it stands out amongst all other religions of the world. So in the words of Tim Keller, the founders of every major religion said, I'll show you how to find God.

Whereas Jesus said, I am God who has come to find you. So the Bible teaches us that each of us are born separated from God.

Separated from God by our sin. And that because of our selfish and prideful nature, there is a sin-shaped barrier between ourselves and our holy God.

So even if there was a path to God, we couldn't take it because of our sin. In our natural state, we can't be in the presence of the holy God because we're just not good enough.

[15:31] And that's not what the world wants to hear. But it's true. But here's the good news. That's the bad news. Here's the good news.

That knowing this, God, out of his love for us, desiring to have a relationship with us, saw us in our helplessness and sent his son, Jesus Christ, to rescue us.

Jesus came as a sacrifice, as a substitute, to die on a cross to pay the penalty for our sin and to remove the barrier that separates us from God.

Jesus didn't come to earth and say, hey, here's a list of things that you must do to get on my level. And if you do them, and if I like you, then you're in.

Because that's not a loving God. That's blackmail. And Jesus didn't come to earth and say, I'm here. Come and find me.

[16:34] And then go home. No, he came to earth to put himself on the line to save us, to rescue us from sin and death so that if we believe in him, we can be forgiven of our sin and united to God.

Now, who doesn't want that? Who doesn't want to be loved by God? Who doesn't want to be saved from death? Who doesn't want to walk with God forever?

I mean, everybody wants that, don't they? Trusting in Jesus offers that. And this is why John goes so hard in this passage.

And this is why the truth is important. Because sin is a real problem. And Jesus is the only answer. And time is running out.

You know, I really sweated and struggled over this talk because we're talking about some pretty heavy stuff here.

[17:34] And about last night, at about 11 o'clock, I was sitting at the kitchen table and I was reading what I'd written. And I was thinking, man, this is rubbish.

And so I'm crossing things out and I'm retyping things and I'm rereading and I'm thinking, no, no, that's not quite right. That's not going to come across well.

No, that's just too long. And so I'm deleting and I'm retyping and this goes back and forth. And then guess what happened? Sunday morning came.

I ran out of time to change things. So here we are right now. In the end, I just had to go with what I'd already decided because there was no more time to change things.

Well, in verse 18, John is acutely aware that we are running out of time to change things, that a decision for or against Jesus is urgently needed.

[18:37] So he says, dear children, in verse 18, this is the last hour. And as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now, many Antichrists have come.

This is how we know it is the last hour. So the last days in the Bible are the time between Jesus' first coming, so when he came to die, to offer forgiveness, and his second coming, a time in the future when Jesus will come again.

But he will come again, this time not to offer hope or forgiveness, but he will bring judgment. judgment to defeat evil once and for all and to take home those who are his.

Now, John, in this passage, he says, this is the last hour. So not the last days, but the last hour. And John wrote this almost 2,000 years ago, so right now, we could be in the last couple of seconds.

John is saying that there is an urgent decision required here because Jesus is on his way. And you're either Antichrist, that is, against Christ, or you are with him.

[20:01] John here, he's drawing up the battle lines. And he says, pick a side. Pick a side because we're in the final seconds. Pick a side because there is a final battle coming and you do not want to be on the losing side.

Which brings us back to the Antichrist because John then says, the Antichrist is coming. Even now, many Antichrists have come.

So the presence of the visiting teachers here, the many Antichrists, plural, the many who are opposed to Christ points towards a greater reality.

That of the Antichrist, singular, who is coming. The opposition that we see to Christianity today is a symptom of a much greater spiritual battle.

And there's much debate about who the Antichrist is, but this much is true. That at the end of time, Satan and evil, so the one who is ultimately opposed to Jesus and to good, will face off against one another one last time.

[21:26] And Jesus will destroy Satan and evil and everything that he stands for. death and sin and sadness will be defeated once and for all and those in the side of Jesus will gain eternal life and joy and happiness and those who oppose Jesus will not.

This is the last hour, John says. Have you picked a side? And then John ends this passage with encouragement in verse 28.

In verse 28, he says, And now, dear children, continue in him, in Jesus, so that when he appears and he's talking about Jesus coming again, we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.

So in the last couple of minutes, I want to encourage. I want to encourage those of us who are Christians here and I want to encourage those of us who are not.

The church in Ephesus in this passage, they're up against it. They face the dangers of false teaching which threatens to rob them of their joy and of the truth.

[22 : 47] And that's no different for us. Although the world is quite a friendly place sometimes, we have to be alert as followers of Christ. We face a constant danger of spiritual attack, the danger of being led astray, the danger of cultural pressure to conform and to accept what the world says is true but which may be false.

And so John encourages his readers then to continue in Jesus, to hold on to the truth, and he reminds his readers of two gifts, two gifts which they already have, two gifts which have been given to them by God to help them stand strongly in the truth.

The first one, that which we have heard from the beginning and the second one, the anointing of the Spirit which they have received. So multiple times in this passage, John says, you know the truth. You know the truth. And they know the truth because of that which they have heard from the beginning in verse 24. God has given us the truth, his word in the Bible.

And this truth has been passed down over thousands of years. This truth has been examined and prodded and tested and tried and it has never failed.

[24 : 13] It's God's word, the Bible, the truth that makes sense of our world, that makes sense of our experience of life and reveals to us our loving God.

The Bible is God's word given to us so that we can know the truth. And then secondly, John says, you have an anointing of the Spirit.

So verse 27, an anointing from the Holy One which remains in you, which teaches you about all things. If you're a Christian here today, when you first trusted in Jesus, whenever that was, you didn't just hear the truth, but you experienced it.

You received the truth, you understood it, you responded to it, and now you live in it. God's Spirit worked in your heart and your mind to save you, and His Spirit continues to work in your life, guiding you and protecting you and helping you to understand and grow in God's truth as you experience God's love day by day.

So John says, Christians, brothers and sisters, we have been given everything we need to stand firm in the face of opposition. through reading the Bible together and reading it to each other and reading it alone, we can know the truth and we can test what we hear against the truth.

[25 : 50] And through God's Spirit, we can experience the truth and live in the truth. And then finally, if you're not a Christian here today, then I want you to know the truth.

I want you to know and experience the truth and that love that God has for you. No matter who you are or no matter what you've done, God loves you and He wants to know you.

He's taken the first step. Jesus Christ has come to rescue you. He died to forgive you of your sin and to offer you joy and peace and a place in heaven.

There's no catch here. But it's up to you whether or not you accept what Jesus offers. But just remember that as John says, we're in the last hour, the offer won't be around forever.

So don't let the opportunity pass you by because without Jesus, you will lose everything. Let's pray.

[27 : 12] Heavenly Father, we thank You that we know the truth. We thank You that You have given us Your Word in the Bible to guide us and to reveal to us the truth.

The truth that You are the God of love, the God who loves and who longs each and every one of us. That You, Lord Jesus, are the God of truth, the God who has defeated sin and who offers forgiveness and hope and joy in eternal life if we trust in You.

Holy Spirit, give us the wisdom to test what we hear in the world against Your truth and help us to remain in Christ, to encourage one another and to glorify God in all that we do.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.