

God's Message to Us in Third John

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Introduction

Today in our sermon series going through the books of the Bible, we come to the third epistle of John.

- Like John's second epistle, it is a one page letter from the one who calls himself *the Elder*, and is almost universally believed to be the Apostle John.

Third John is an excellent companion piece to Second John, as both speak about the matter of showing hospitality to travelling missionaries.

- In short, Second John opposes those who support missionaries who deny the truth and Third John commends those who support faithful missionaries.
- Both books, along with the gospel of John and the first epistle of John, stress to us the importance of maintaining both truth and love in our Christian walk.
 - This is so helpful for us, as I mentioned last week, because we live in a day when people think that love and truth are mutually exclusive.
 - John makes it clear that in Christ, it is rather that they cannot be separated...
 - For how could it be in love that anybody would support and encourage people who are spreading lies about Christ (as spoken of in Second John); and how could it be in love that anybody would oppose the support and encouragement of people who are spreading the truth about Christ?

Let's take a look at Third John.

I. What an encouragement to see the loving heart of this mature apostle.

- In his opening words, he freely expresses his affection for Gaius to whom he addresses this letter.

A. In verse 1, he declares his love for him.

- He says, "**THE ELDER, to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.**"

1. To John, he is not just Gaius, but *the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.*

- There is something very natural and uncontrived about this.
 - You get the impression that it is not cheap talk, but that John really does love him.
- 2. It is important for ministers and elders to cultivate such love, and as they do, to express it—not artificially, but when it is truly there.
 - Fathers and mothers need to do the same with their children—to think of them as *my beloved Gaius* or *my beloved Sally* or whatever.
 - If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we are too often devoid of this love—and sadly, it shows.
 - So many children have no sense that they are loved by their parents, and these loved-starved children crave the acceptance of their peers and are often willing to do almost anything to obtain it.

- It's very sad, because they don't learn what true love really is and take the cheap substitutes that the world offers.
 - But let me address you if it is that case with you that you do not sense the love of your parents or your church elders...
 - this does not give you an excuse to run off and find acceptance from the world... no... rather it should stir you up to consider Christ and the great love that He has for us.
 - Your parents and the elders of the church will likely never be nearly as mature as the Apostle John was, but when you see John's love, know that it itself is only a pale reflection of the love of Christ.
 - All of you, continue in God's word, and you will see the great love that Christ has, and as you do, you will find your security in Him and you will be able to begin to grow in your love for others.
- So John's love is an example for us of what our love should be as well as a reminder of the love of Christ that is far greater.
3. Note how John also says that he loves Gaius *in truth*.
- This does not mean *in sincerity*, but *in the realm of truth*.
 - We saw this in Second John as well.
 - It speaks of the special bond we have with all those who are *in the truth*, all of those who are joined with us as the redeemed followers of Jesus Christ.
 - We are no longer joined with the world that is in rebellion against God, we are joined with those who have returned to God through Jesus Christ.
 - Together we seek His glory, together we seek to advance His kingdom, together we strive to please Him;
 - And we are to both give and receive help from each other in doing this.
 - We love each other as those who have been begotten of Him, and who are growing together as His sons and daughters, destined to receive the glorious inheritance that He has promised to us.
- B. In verse 2, John tells Gaius how he prays for his physical wellbeing.
- It says: **Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.**
1. *That you may prosper in all things* is literally *that you may have a good journey*.
- It speaks of movement along life's journey, and carries the idea that everything would go well for you as you go on in life.
 - When you love people as a Christian, you will pray for their overall well-being.
2. And you can see that John specifically mentions Gaius's health—
- Perhaps Gaius, like many believers, had some health problems.
 - In any case, by praying for this, John shows us that when we love each other as believers, we not only care for each other's souls,
 - but also for our prosperity in this world and our physical health.

- If you are too spiritual to pray for the health of your Christian friends, then your spirituality is twisted and needs to be straightened out.
- Nevertheless, it is clear that John’s greatest concern is for Gaius’s spiritual wellbeing.
- You can see how, at the end of verse 3, he adds that Gaius may prosper and be in health *even as your soul prospers*.
- C. Verse 3 & 4 show us that John’s greatest delight is to see Gaius walking in the truth.
1. As an aged apostle who loved God, John knew what was most important about a person—and it was that that person walks in the truth.
 - a. He tells Gaius here how glad it made him to learn that he was walking in the truth. He learned this from the brethren who had reported it to John.
 - Those John calls “the brethren” are missionaries that had stayed with Gaius before they had come to see John.
 - You can see the scene as they come to the dear apostle and he greets them and asks of their journey, and along the way, he says, “And how was Gaius?”
 - And they say, “His health could be better, but he remains faithful. He is full of love for the brethren and he continues in the truth.”
 - And John says, “Ah yes, my beloved Gaius... and how is...” and the conversation continues.
 - b. Look at how fully and how strongly John expresses his delight.
 - **3 John 1:3-4: For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth *that is in you, just as you walk in the truth.* 4 I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.**
 - John knew that if Gaius was walking in the truth, it meant that he was truly in Christ.
 - It thrilled him to know that he was living for Christ, honouring Christ, and promoting His name in the world.
 - It thrilled him to know that at the last day, he would see Gaius with Christ when Christ comes in His glory.
 - Gaius would be there, beloved of Christ, sharing in His glory, joining in the songs of praise and adoration.
 - Nothing gave John more joy about his children in the faith than to hear that they were walking in the truth.
 - Nothing matters more than this.
 2. And now I ask you, does anything matter more to you than walking in the truth?
 - a. If anything is more important to you in your own life than that you are walking in the truth, then your values are completely misplaced.
 - As Jesus once said in Mark 8:36, “**For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?**”
 - What are seventy years of having everything that the world can offer you compared to eternity in hell?

- It would be very foolish for you to ignore this question.
 - It won't change reality for you to ignore reality.
- b. And what about you elders and you parents?
 - Do you have love for those who are under your care that finds your greatest delight...
 - what—when they love you? when they make you look good in the world? when they prosper financially?
 - Is your child's success in the world—or their health—more important to you than their souls?
 - Then you don't really love your child because you are not concerned about what is best for them.
 - If you were, your greatest joy would be to know that they are walking in the truth.

TRANS> So you see that the apostle's heart of love for Gaius is a spur to you both as a leader and as a disciple.

- As a disciple, it is spur to devote yourself to what the Apostle John considers to be—rather knows to be—the most important thing of all: that you walk in the truth.
- And as an elder or a parent, it spurs you on to cultivate a genuine love like John describes here for his beloved Gaius.
- And now we are ready to move on the main point...
 - John, knowing that Gaius is walking in the truth, wants to commend him about something in particular... for faithfully supporting missionaries.

II. My brothers and sisters, see here in Third John how good it is to support godly missionaries.

- When John assures Gaius in verses 5-8 that supporting missionaries is a good thing, we are to conclude that it is obviously a good thing for us to do too!
- A. He begins by commending Gaius for supporting them.
- Look at verses 5 & 6 where John says to Gaius: **Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, ⁶ who have borne witness of your love before the church.**
 - Here we have these missionaries, as I mentioned before, coming to John and telling him about Gaius and how he had provided for them when they were passing through even though he had never met them.
 - 1. John tells Gaius that all that he did for them, he did in faithfulness.
 - The word *faithfully* probably refers Gaius's loyalty to John and to the Lord.
 - Gaius supported these *brethren* because they were missionaries that the Apostle John recognised, so in loyalty to John, Gaius supported them even though they were strangers to him.
 - He trusted the apostle and gladly supported anyone John recognised and probably commended by a letter he sent with them.

- John mentions in verse 9 that even though he wrote to the church, Diotrephes did not receive them.
 - We know that in Second John, John warned about giving assistance to those who denied that Jesus had come in the flesh,
 - so it only makes sense that John would have written a letter of approval for those that were sent out in service to the Lord.
 - So Gaius, in response to John's recommendation, in loyalty to John and to the Lord that these missionaries served, did many things for them... of which John says,
 - you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers.
2. That these brethren and strangers were missionaries becomes clear in verse 7 where it says that they *went forth* for His (Christ's) name.
 - To go forth for Christ's name means that they weren't travelling for business or pleasure, but that they were on the Lord's business... going to proclaim Christ.
 - Gaius received them as those who were going in the name of Christ, even though they were also strangers.
 - Even though Gaius had never met many of them, he welcomed them because of his loyalty to John
 3. These brothers actually gave an official report at the church when they returned to John about the love that Gaius had shown to them.
 - John says that they have **borne witness of your love before the church.**
- B. In the remainder of verse 6, John tells Gaius that supporting missionaries in a manner that is worthy of God is a beautiful thing to do.
1. He says: **If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well.**
 - a. To **send them forward on their journey** means that Gaius had provided for their journey—giving them the supplies and the money that they needed.
 - And to do this in a manner worthy of God is to do it with the sense that he was not just doing it for them, but for God whom they represent.
 - It is like the command to do our work heartily as unto the Lord and not unto men—you could say, in a manner worthy of God.
 - b. John tells Gaius if he sends them in this manner, he will *do well*.
 - That is to say, that it is a fine deed, a beautiful deed that has been done.
 - The word *well* speaks of something that is fine or beautiful.
 2. John tells us three reasons why supporting missionaries is such a good thing to do.
 - a. First, because these missionaries **have gone forth for His name's sake.**
 - They are on God's business.
 - They have gone out for the glory of God, to make His name known and to lead sinners to Him for salvation so that they might be reconciled to Him.
 - This is a much better cause than fine clothes, fine cars, fine food, fine houses and lands, sports, and recreation—

- and it is certainly far better than squandering your money on drinking parties or prostitutes and pornography.
 - We should lament that as a church we are not meeting our budget which affects our ability to support the missions that we might support... those who have gone forth for His name's sake.
 - Evaluate your priorities, and by all means, if you are not tithing it is high time for you to repent and do what God has called you to do.
 - You are robbing from God Himself when you neglect this duty.
- b. The second reason you do well to support missionaries is because the people they are working for will not be supporting them.
- The Bible tells calls upon believers to support their own ministers (Gal 6:6): **Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.**
 - But when missionaries go out to preach the gospel to the lost, who will support them? Not the lost people they are serving.
 - 3 John 1:7 says: **because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles.**
 - By **Gentiles**, John does not mean non-Jews here, but unbelievers—you might remember how Paul said to the Corinthians, **“you know that you were Gentiles...”**
 - So since these missionaries are not supported by the people they are serving, and since, as 1 Cor 9:14 says: **the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel,**
 - you do well when you send them forth in a manner worthy of God.
- c. And John adds a third reason for us to receive missionaries to support them, in verse 8...**We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth.**
- The point here is that you actually get credit for participating in the work that they are doing when you support them.
 - The hours you spend at work earning that portion of your wages that goes to the support of missionaries is work done for Christ and His kingdom.
 - Our Lord is very generous—He even rewards a cup of cold water given in His name—given to support the work of His kingdom.
 - In Matthew 25, He says that whatever you do even for these least of His brethren you have done for Him.
 - Certainly, your prayers and you acts of service for missionaries are also ways that you become fellow workers for the truth that they are promoting.
 - And these words, *workers for the truth* remind us what we learned in Second John,
 - that if we support those who are deceivers who do not preach the truth about Jesus, you become a partaker with them for the promotion of their lies!

TRANS> But truly, you do a fine deed when you have a hand in sending forth those who go forth for the name of Christ in a manner worthy of God.

- That is what John the apostle lays down for us here!
- And so, since it is such a fine thing to do:

III. See that you do not let those with selfish ambition hinder you from supporting missionaries.

A. Diotrephes is presented to us in Third John as a wretched example of a minister or elder with selfish ambition.

1. John tells us as soon as he mentions him that he is a man who loves to have the pre-eminence in the church.

- In verse 9, he says: **I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the pre-eminence among them, does not receive us.**
- So you see that where Gaius loved Christ, His people, His missionaries, and His church; Diotrephes loved to be first.
 - Such selfish ambition causes men to oppose all who refuse to bow to them... they are full jealousy because their goal is to be first.
 - If they see others in authority doing well, they want to tear them down, not because of any wrong in these ministers, but because of envy.
 - Don't misunderstand, a faithful minister of Christ must oppose those who reject the truth, as we saw in Second John;
 - but Diotrephes was opposing those who were in the truth.

2. Look at how his deeds are described.

a. First, John says in verse 9 that when he wrote to the church, 'Diotrephes did not receive us.'

- Surely John by speaking of *us*, John is referring to him and his fellow missionaries—the brethren that Gaius was commended for receiving.
- Apparently, John had sent letters of commendation with them, but Diotrephes, John said, does not receive us.
 - It made no difference to him that John had written—he would have no part in taking on these missionaries—just because John said they were worthy.

b. Second, John tells how Diotrephes spoke against John and his fellow workers.

- Verse 10 begins: **Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words.**
 - To prate is to talk nonsense—to speaks words that are wicked and senseless, to make baseless and spiteful charges against them.
- You have here a man who is eager to find fault with John and his fellow workers.
 - The authority of John and the esteem in which he and his fellow workers were held made Diotrephes eager to tear them down.
 - They were a threat to him having first place.

- Sadly, there is no foundation in the criticism that many ministers lodge against other ministers—
 - I have seen where ambitious ministers will twist the words of their peers, will accuse them of lying when they say that they do not believe what their detractors say they believe, and will rejoice when they can find some wrong with them—and will refuse to let it go even if it is proven to be false.
 - They prate with malicious words aimed at undermining the authority of all that might be esteemed above them.
 - It is sick, but I wonder if any of you could say that there is nothing of this sin in you?
 - I am ashamed to say that I have found it in me much more than I would like.
- But Diotrephes did not stop with words...
- c. John tells us that he went to extreme lengths to ensure that nobody in his jurisdiction supported the missionaries that John endorsed.
 - Listen to the remainder of verse 10: **And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.**
 - So he would not receive the brethren...
 - And he forbade anyone else from doing so, even putting them out of the church.
 - Jesus made it clear that as in the Old Testament, it was the assembly of church elders (the ecclesia) that was responsible for binding and loosing sins, just as it had always been.
 - Paul was careful to always establish a plurality of elders in every church whom he called bishops, but Diotrephes was one of the first who sought to be a monarchical bishop—a single individual who claimed authority to put people out of the church!
 - Perhaps at this stage in history, he had other elders around him who were mere yes men, but in any case, he led the way in putting those out of the church who supported missionaries the way Gaius did...
 - It is likely that Gaius and Diotrephes were in the same Presbytery, but serving in different congregations as either ruling or teaching elders.

B. John tells Gaius not to follow this man's evil example!

- Verse 11 says: **Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God.**
- 1. Under such powerful criticism, it might be tempting for Gaius to avoid supporting the brethren, just to keep the peace.
 - A godly man like Gaius would find no pleasure in strife—in stirring up another Presbyter—and it might cause him to at least reduce what he had been doing for these missionaries.

- It would be very easy for even a good man to fall prey to that...
 - But John says, “Don’t!”
 - Don’t imitate what is evil, but what is good.
 - If Gaius were to stop helping these missionaries, he would no longer be doing good. He would be doing evil.
 - John, the loving apostle—because he is a loving apostle—spares no punches...
 - He declares that those who do good are of God, but that those who do evil, like Diotrophes, have not seen God.
2. Think of how evil it was to withhold support from these brethren...
- It was to hinder the work of Christ and His kingdom.
 - It was to, as far as Diotrophes was concerned, to prevent sinners from hearing the gospel that they might be saved.
 - All because of the selfish ambition of one man. What damage!
 - But what of those who withhold their tithes?
 - What of those who have no interest in being fellow workers with those who spread the gospel?
 - Are they imitating Gaius or Diotrophes?
 - Are they imitating what is good or what is evil?
 - John has these words for you: **Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good.**
- C. And now John commends another brother to Gaius—one who is worthy of support.
- In verse 12 he says: **Demetrius has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself. And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true.**
 - It is possible that Demetrius was even the one who brought this letter from John. But in any case,
1. John commends him as one who is widely recognised as a faithful servant of Christ—
- who **has a good testimony from all...**
 - And John adds that he has a testimony also from **the truth itself...**
 - What Demetrius does is harmony with the truth revealed in God’s word.
 - And John himself, along with his fellow workers, vouch for him... **And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true.**
 - Whatever Diotrophes might say about John and his fellow workers, their testimony is not false—and Gaius knows that—he knows that it can be trusted more than the malicious words of Diotrophes.
2. It is important to receive such endorsements about the missionaries we support.
- That is why Presbyteries who send men out to plant churches (men like Kevin Carter) or to serve as missionaries in Malawi (men like Tom Van Maanen) need to examine them carefully and only lay hands on those who do have a good testimony.

- But when such men are endorsed, we should be eager to do what we can to support them—to do our part in sending them forth in a manner worthy of God...
 - That they might go forth for the name of Christ, serving the Gentiles without receiving anything from them, and that we might be fellow workers with them for the truth.
- It is an inestimable privilege to have a part in building Christ's kingdom and leading souls from the darkness to the light, from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God.
 - Just look at how far the gospel has already gone—it is gone to many nations and many peoples all over the world.
 - And it is ours to continue to share until all are safely gathered into the fold of God and our Lord returns with glory.

Conclusion: John closes with warm greetings... expressing his desire to see them soon if he can:

- Verse 13-14: **I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink; ¹⁴ but I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face. Peace to you. Our friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.**
- What love he has for his beloved Gaius who walks in the truth!
 - Are you in that noble company of those are of the truth?
 - Who love the brethren and love to see the truth go forth by them?
 - Or are you a cold resentful Diotrophes who has not seen God?
- I remind you that the way into this holy fellowship of the saints is not by trying to promote yourself or your own goodness...
 - It is by coming to Christ in whom we have the forgiveness of sins by His cross and eternal life as His gracious gift bestowed on all who come to Him.
 - There is no greater joy than to know that you are walking in the truth because there is nothing better than for you than to walk in the truth.
 - By Him, you are enriched for all liberality.