

Third John could be described as the last of the Pastoral Epistles!

We usually reserve that description for 1-2 Timothy and Titus,  
but it also describes 3 John,  
a letter from the “elder” to “the beloved Gaius”  
who is undoubtedly part of the same eldership.

First John outlines John’s basic teaching.

Second John applies it to the elect lady (the city church, probably of Ephesus).

Third John helps us to see how the elders are to put it into practice.

**Introduction: the Beloved Gaius (v1-4)**

<sup>1</sup> *The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.*

Verse 9 indicates that John has already written to the church (probably 2 John),  
but he writes as well to Gaius –  
a fellow minister in the church of the elect lady.

There are no explicit references to Jesus, Christ, the Son of God, or the Holy Spirit.

Everything is assumed – as John could do,  
because he is writing to a trusted colleague  
who already understands John’s whole message.

As Yarbrough puts it,

“It is...a day in the life of two ministerial colleagues  
dealing with typical issues of their age.

It will be seen that in some ways not a lot has changed  
in the intervening centuries.” (364)

John addresses Gaius as “beloved” – which means more than a dear friend,  
but as one who is loved in Christ – in the truth.

No other term expresses so much in terms of Christian greetings.

John takes his own teaching to heart!

“Love one another” – means that John loves Gaius!

<sup>2</sup> *Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.*

John’s love takes shape in prayer.

Bodily health is useful – but John prays that your bodily health  
would correspond to your spiritual health –  
an attitude that reveals a great deal about John’s perspective on life.

And verses 3-4 help us understand what spiritual health looks like:

<sup>3</sup>*For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth.* <sup>4</sup>*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*

Spiritual well-being is characterized by walking in the truth.

We looked this morning at the theme of pilgrimage.

Proverbs 9 – with much of OT wisdom literature –

speaks of the two ways – the two paths – of wisdom and folly.

Walking in the truth is the way of wisdom.

Walking in lies is the way of folly.

John blends together the theme of pilgrimage and the theme of wisdom as he speaks of “walking in the truth.”

Walking in the truth means to have a life that is characterized by truth.

As we’ve seen throughout John’s letters,

truth starts with Jesus –

truth starts with the incarnation of the Word.

And when the one who *is* the truth abides with you,

then truth begins to characterize you,

both in terms of confessing the truth

(Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh)

and living and doing the truth

(love and obedience).

Third John, then, describes what it looks like to “walk in the truth”

by bookending the two faithful walkers, Gaius and Demetrius,

with the wicked nonsense of Diotrephes in the middle.

### **1. Commendation of Fellow Workers for the Truth (v5-8)**

<sup>5</sup>*Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are,* <sup>6</sup>*who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God.* <sup>7</sup>*For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.* <sup>8</sup>*Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.*

Verses 5-8 begin by describing the situation in Ephesus.

There are strangers – traveling preachers – who have recently come through town.

Jesus had said, “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.”

Jesus told his disciples, “Whatever town or village you enter,

find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart.

As you enter the house, greet it.

And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it,

but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.

And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words,  
shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.  
Truly I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment  
for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.” (Matt 10:11-15)

Jesus also told his disciples, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matt 25:35)  
How?

Because “in as much as you did it to the least of these my brethren,  
you did it unto me.”

Third John tells us that some wandering preachers came to Gaius,  
and he welcomed them;  
they also encountered Diotrephes,  
who rejected them;  
they later came to John,  
and now John writes to commend Gaius for his treatment of them.

How do you treat strangers?

Particularly, how do you treat wandering preachers?

Sodom and Gomorrah treated wandering preachers despicably!  
But John says that how you treat those who have left all for the sake of Christ  
lies at the heart of what it means to walk in the truth.

Now, the support here plainly indicates some sort of financial or material provision.  
Missionary support in the first century was quite different from today!

There are no international banks.

There are no ATMs!

If you want to provide support and provision to someone who is elsewhere,  
then you need to send it personally.

For this reason missionary support tended to be somewhat ad hoc –  
and missionaries only went as far as their support network would allow.

(This seems to be part of the reason why Paul always traveled with a team!

Some [or all] members of the team would work in order to provide for  
those who would preach!)

So when a traveling preacher came to town,  
this was probably your one chance of providing for him!

Perhaps we’re a bit more organized in our missionary efforts.

Given the advances in communication and transportation technology  
we can move people and resources a lot more quickly!

We can also check up on people a lot more quickly!

When a wandering preacher comes to town,  
we can find out very quickly if he is who he says he is!

I think back to instances in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries  
when traveling preachers would show up in town  
claiming to be a Presbyterian minister.  
The church might be without a pastor,  
so they would welcome him in – allow him to preach –  
and only months later discover that he was a fraud!

John is not saying that we should ignore due diligence!  
But our technological ability should never interfere with walking in the truth!  
The 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century churches were *right* to welcome these men (initially).  
After all, John says that as long as they come to you with *this teaching*,  
you are to welcome them and receive them.  
It is only if they “go on ahead” (whether in doctrine or in practice)  
that you should refuse to hear, or even to greet them!

John commends Gaius for his concern and care for the wandering preachers –  
and says that as we support them,  
we become fellow-workers with them.

In other words, Gaius has faithfully implemented the sort of love and truth  
that John has inculcated through his preaching and teaching.

And so John rejoices that his “children” are walking in the truth.

A comment on the “Gentiles” of verse 7:

<sup>7</sup>*For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.*

This is not the normal word for “Gentile” (ethnos),  
but is the word “ethnikos” – which refers to the nations,  
and almost certainly emphasizes the *unbelieving* Gentiles –  
the pagans, or heathens.

These preachers refuse to compromise the gospel  
for the sake of getting material support from the polytheists around them.

As Yarbrough puts it, (375)

“Anyone today who has witness analogous heroism on the parts of, say,  
Muslim converts in Islamic countries seeking to bear Christian witness  
without social compromise  
can appreciate John’s commendation of these gritty gospel servants.”

Verses 9-10 then get to the heart of the problem:

## **2. Condemnation of Diotrephes Who Likes to Put Himself First (v9-10)**

<sup>9</sup>*I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. <sup>10</sup>So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing,*

*talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.*

Verse 9 states that John had already written something to the church  
(probably 2 John – but possibly 1 John as well),  
but that Diotrephes refused to listen.

If you look back at 2 John, you can see precisely what Diotrephes would have rejected.  
“Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ  
does not have God.” (v9)

Diotrephes is an innovator – one who goes on ahead –  
that is simply another way of saying ‘who likes to put himself first,’  
and ‘does not acknowledge our authority.’

John assumes that Gaius knows exactly what Diotrephes is doing,  
so he doesn’t give us much in the way of detail.

But from what we know, we can say a little:

Diotrephes appears to have significant position in the church.  
He is clearly an elder along with John and Gaius.  
He speaks wicked nonsense about John.  
He refuses to welcome the traveling preachers,  
and even worse, he puts those who do welcome them out of the church.

It may appear unbelievable that someone would put himself first, ahead of an apostle!  
But you have to remember that in the first century  
the apostles did not have quasi-mythic status!  
(All you have to do is read the epistles of Paul to realize that!)

But also notice that John does not respond by brandishing apostolic authority.  
John does not say “I’ll show him!”

Rather, John says “if I come, I will bring up what he is doing.”  
John has remarkable confidence in the ordinary means.

Now, if Diotrephes has been expelling those who welcome the brethren –  
and Gaius has welcomed the brethren,  
does this mean that Gaius has been expelled by Diotrephes?  
Probably not.

Given what we know about the ecclesiastical situation in Ephesus at this time,  
it would appear that Gaius and Diotrephes  
were both pastors – elders in the city church (the elect lady)  
of Ephesus.

It is possible that both of them had been summoned by Paul to Miletus  
in Acts 20.

Paul has written to the “elect lady” – the city church of Ephesus –  
in 2 John.

The problems in Ephesus, however,  
are focused in the one house church where Diotrephes is pastor.

But John seems confident that if he brings this up in the presbytery of Ephesus,  
the elders will take care of it.

So little has changed since the first century!

We still have Diotrephes with us –  
ministers who put themselves first.

Jesus said that the one who would lead  
must be the servant of all,  
since Christ himself came not to be served, but to serve,  
and give his life as a ransom for many.

### **3. Commendation of Demetrius the Good (v11-12)**

*<sup>11</sup>Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. <sup>12</sup>Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.*

In verses 11-12 John contrasts Diotrephes with Demetrius.

Verse 11 provides the basic contrast:  
Whoever does good is from God  
Whoever does evil has not seen God.

If you want to know what evil looks like,  
look at Diotrephes – but don’t imitate him!  
Don’t seek to be first!

If you want to know what good looks like,  
look at Demetrius!

But don’t just “look” at Demetrius –  
imitate him.

Paul will say, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ” – (2 Thess 3:7-9)  
and Hebrews will encourage us to imitate those who taught us Christ (13:7).

The Christian life is not just about “doing good,”  
but imitating those who do good.

What is the difference?

“Doing good” could possibly happen in isolation.  
“Imitating good” cannot possibly happen in isolation!

Imitation requires a closeness – a level of interaction –  
that permits you to see what a man’s life looks like.

Who do you imitate?

Who do you most resemble?

Probably your parents –  
because you have seen so much of how they do things.  
I hope that’s a good thing!

My parents divorced when I was 13.  
I learned very quickly that what I had *thought* was a good marriage,  
in fact, was not.  
And so I spent the better part of the decade of the 1990s  
looking for marriages that I wanted to imitate.

You can learn a lot from books –  
but there is no substitute for the personal reality of a godly life.

Beloved,  
do not imitate evil but imitate good.

Imitate Demetrius!

Who was Demetrius?

Demetrius is probably the bearer of the letter.  
Letter-bearers were usually tasked with giving additional information  
beyond that which was written down,  
so it is important for Gaius to know how reliable he is.

And John says that Demetrius has a “good testimony” from everyone around John –  
and indeed, from the truth itself.

This is an interesting way of saying things!

The truth – as it is in Jesus – commends Demetrius!  
And so John adds his own commendation,  
because “you know that our testimony is true.”

### **Conclusion (v13-15)**

<sup>13</sup> *I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. <sup>14</sup>I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.*

<sup>15</sup> *Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them.*

Verses 13-14 are virtually identical to the conclusion of 2 John –  
the chief alteration being a shift to second person singular, instead of plural!  
John expects to come soon – in which case all these matters can be dealt with face to face

He then concludes with a parting message of “peace.”  
John doesn’t use the word “peace” (eirene) very often.  
He uses it here, I would suggest,  
because shalom – peace – was very much needed in Gaius’s life.  
Diotrephes is making a mess of the church –  
and peace must – and will – come to Gaius.

John’s final words are words of greeting.  
The friends greet you.  
Greet the friends, every one of them.

Remember that John had warned at the end of 2 John  
not to receive the one who does not bring this teaching –  
“do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting,  
for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.”

Christian greetings are an affirmation of “friendship.”  
But what is friendship?

This is the word “philoï” – a rather rare word in the NT.

Usually John (and the rest of the NT writers) speak of the “beloved” (agapetoi).  
or “brothers” (adelphous),  
but here he says “friends” (philoï)

In so doing, John evokes memories of Jesus’ parting words to his disciples in John 15  
“no longer do I call you servants, but friends”  
and one of the central features of this friendship  
is that he lays down his life for his friends.

Nowadays friendship is usually defined in relational terms –  
how we “get along” – or how much time we spend together.

I find it really interesting to read 19<sup>th</sup> century letters,  
where people describe “friendship” in terms of what they *do* for each other.

To say “I have friends in that city”  
means, I have people who will do things for me in that city.

Friendship means allegiance.  
Friendship means someone who is bound to you by ties of blood or affection  
who will not let you down.

Now, certainly there can be all sorts of ungodly friendships!  
But *Christian* friendship is a friendship whereby we are bound together  
by the blood and affection of Christ.

You see, this is why I tell you that wherever you go,  
you are not far from a friend of mine!

Some of it has to do with personal bonds of friendship.  
But in other cases, it is simply that I know there is a church there –  
and therefore, by definition, there are friends!

And my goal is to see these friendships grow and thrive –  
as we imitate those who have taught us the teaching of Christ.

And so John's final epistle concludes  
with Gaius greeting each of the "friends" –  
each of the ones for whom Christ died –  
each of the ones for whom John (and by implication, Gaius)  
will lay down his life.