

Transcript

3 John

Dr David L Cook

Selkirk Street Evangelical Church, Hamilton 27th June 2004

[Reading 3 John NIV

The first 2 sentences are missing from the audio file but included here for reference. Please note, the reading is from an older version of the NIV. The New International Version was revised in 2011 and the reading is available on [Bible Gateway](#)]

The elder,

To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.

00:00

It gave me great joy to have some believers come and tell me about your faithfulness to the truth, and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.

00:50

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.

I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

[END OF READING]

Transcript

02:17

Now let's pray. Lord, open up your Word to us and our minds and hearts to your message through our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

This is a personal letter. It's the most personal of the three that we have by John, and I would think that it's the most personal letter in all of the Bible. But it's not private of course. It has been read down through the years and here we are looking into it this evening.

03:04

Very attractive note it is. Very brief. That sometimes makes letters attractive: brief. Just one sheet of papyrus, that's all. It's very direct, straight, honest. Of course, it opens up a very serious problem that has arisen in a church. And of course, that connects with us. We realize we're not talking about some fictional group of people, just ordinary folk. And of course, churches in the early days, we've got to remember churches in the early days were not perfect, any more than they're perfect today. You know what some wit once said: "if you find a perfect church, whatever you do don't join it, you'll soon spoil it." And then there are personalities in this, and that makes it all the more interesting and intriguing. It gives a high level of interest to it. But above all, this little letter is attractive because God speaks to us through it.

There are four men that appear in the letter, and we'll just follow them through as we look through it. There's The Elder, there's Gaius, there's Diotrephes, and there's Demetrius.

[THE ELDER]

04:41

First of all, The Elder. Now the writer just calls himself The Elder as he does in Second John. First John is very different, of course. Now, without going into all the ins and outs of this, I think we conclude this is the Apostle John. And he chooses this self-designation because I presume it's a term of affection and respect, which he had well and truly earned. It was how Christians had come to regard him. Not quite 'the old man', but something like that, The Elder. And he was happy just to use it. You see, John has no need now at this advanced stage, no need to emphasize his position as an Apostle, everybody knew that. Highly respected. More than that, I think it's appropriate that he just chooses to call himself The Elder. In a letter, in which he's going to emphasize service comes before status in every church. What matters is how we serve, not position. The Elder then.

[GAIUS]

06:06

Now let's come to Gaius, this very intriguing man. Gaius, to whom the letter's written. Who was he? Now we like to pin these things down, and you know, as soon as people see Gaius, they say, "Oh, I've come across that name before." So, they look at elsewhere in the New Testament and people say, "Oh, yeah." There's Gaius of Corinth where, you know, the man Paul lodged with and a stalwart for the faith. Couldn't have been him. Then there's Gaius of Macedonia who travelled with Paul now and again. And then there's another Gaius, Gaius of Derby who also turns up in a group of believers and a

Transcript

representative group they were accompanying Paul. Now it so happens that in the fourth century, a Christian document has survived, which says, "That's the man that's referred to here." So inevitably, scholars in our day bend over backwards to say, "Maybe it is, yeah, it could be because it could be this, that and the other thing." The fact of the matter is, we don't know. And I'll tell you something else. It's probably unwise to do that because we only know of three, and there were thousands of people by the name of Gaius in that day in the Roman Empire, because it was the most popular name of all for a male. Not surprising. Everybody knows Julius Caesar. You know they great politician, soldier, writer. 'Caesar of the "Gallic Wars', inflicted on many young people by folk like me on days gone by¹. And you know how he brought expeditionary forces to Britain even, twice. Wasn't brave enough to come this way but never mind. So, the famous dictator, Julius Caesar: But you know his full name, Gaius Julius Caesar. There was also an emperor by the name of Gaius, better known, a terrible man, by the name Caligula, his nickname. So, you see, we better just say, well let's see what this letter says about Gaius and not try to pin him down needlessly to somebody else. Tells us enough, in fact.

08:43

First thing it tells us is he's a highly respected Christian. He's called The Beloved. That's how people thought about him. And John then goes on to say, "whom I love in the truth". That is, John is talking about a personal bond between himself and the man he's writing to: Gaius. A bond in the gospel, in the truth. This is the ground and basis of all relationships between believers. Love: "whom I love in the truth". Now, from just one of the phrases that Ann read to us, it's possible that Gaius was brought to the Lord by John, the way he refers to my children. I'm not saying that's the case, but there was this special bond between the older John and the younger man, Gaius. Highly respected Christian.

09:55

Second thing we note about him is he was in good shape spiritually. John uses the conventions of letter writing in those days. It was common after a word of greeting to utter a kind of pious prayer for the good health of the person you are writing to. In fact, it was so common that very often they just used an abbreviation, didn't write the whole thing in full. And here, John uses that convention, but he puts a turn to it, just as Paul does in his letters. You see, the letters are the New Testament are not dead formal things, they're living! And so you get this turn to it. And the turn he gives to it, I find both intriguing and very, very challenging. He says, "I'm praying that you will get along well, and be in good health just as you are in good spiritual health." Now, very often I read this, I stop, and I feel that there's a tremendous challenge here. I say to myself, "Now, suppose, suppose that prayer were answered for me just in an instant. How would I look?" Robust, healthy, or just a rattle of bones?

11:44

What is good spiritual health? Well, this is now developed for us. Good spiritual health is being faithful to the truth. John says, "Some brothers have come along here, have

¹ Dr David Cook was a secondary school classics teacher before becoming a Headmaster.

Transcript

come back here, and they've spoken about this. They're speaking about your loyal adherence to gospel truth, the truth as it is in Jesus." But with Gaius it's not just talk. As the phrase goes, he walked the talk. He lived the truth. His whole life was worthy of the gospel. It was in the truth.

12:38

Just a week ago, there was an obituary in at least the Herald newspaper, probably others, on Professor Murdo Ewen MacDonald, a well-kent figure in Scotland for a number of years, because of his forthright ability to communicate. A theologian of considerable standing. But this person writing the biography, politician, said this simple phrase that struck me. It said, "his beliefs shone through everything he did". Think about that: "His beliefs shone through everything he did". When it comes to our beliefs, spiritual health is when they shine through everything we do. It means, spiritual health means, living as a Christian should. John says, "This brings the greatest joy to my old heart. Just to hear that some of my children are doing this, living their lives by the truth." John, you see, whether Gaius was a convert, he certainly is within John's deep pastoral interest. And this is the heart of a real shepherd beating here. "It brings me the greatest joy", he says, "to hear that some of my children are living by the truth." You see how that brings us up with a start? Profession has to be matched by practice; doctrine, by deeds; beliefs, by behaviour. Spiritual health is living as a Christian should.

14:35

But secondly, as we go through the passage, spiritual health is loving as a Christian should. Gaius's treatment of the brothers, they're called the brothers here, shows remarkable kindness. Which is, of course, a product of the work of the Spirit of God in any person's life. Kindness, love. Now these brothers were strangers to him, he'd never met them before. And this is one of the things that many a Christian will tell you who has travelled about the world. They arrive at a place quite unknown. They meet a Christian, or a group of Christians, and suddenly they're welcome. I know Christians who have said, "And they actually took me into their house, and said, 'Just come in and make yourself at home'. Never seen me before!". Now, hear these brothers, the brothers came, and Gaius made them welcome we're told. He welcomed them into his home and helped them in every way he could. Now, when he says 'the brothers', now I believe what he's talking about is 'itinerant teachers.' In the early days of the church, itinerant teachers played an extremely important part, moving around the new churches. Just the same as the day, there are churches in Africa, in China, calling out for somebody to come and help and teach them the truth.

16:24

So, these early teachers, and there were other teachers that went about, as you've discovered from 2 John, other kinds of teachers, went about, but these are 'the teachers', the teachers of the truth. And Gaius welcomes them, and brings them into his house, gives them hospitality, and encourages and just supplies them with what they need. Now, it's clear, they have come back to the sending church where John is, and they've had a report meeting. And in the course of this report meeting in the open church they have said, "this man Gaius was an outstanding help to us. His kindness was wonderful." They spoke of his love and his kindness before the church. And this, of

Transcript

course, was a tremendous boost to John. And so, John then puts a sort of request and encouragement to him and he says, "Now, keep it up, Gaius." In other words, don't let people stop or hinder you from doing this. You keep this up. You receive these people and send them on their way. Now, sending them on their way doesn't mean to say, "I'm glad to get them off the hands." It means, after giving them hospitality, then provide for them what they need to get on the next bit of their journey. You see, these people, John says, "Really deserve to be helped in that way."

18:04

Why?

First of all, he says, "They've gone forth, as John well knew, for the sake of The Name." Now, you'll see that Name will have a capital letter in your Bible, "for the sake of The Name." Did you notice when Ann was reading through that John, that we don't meet The Name, the actual name of Jesus Christ in this letter. Not usual in the pages of the New Testament letters, but, he just says The Name, just as he called himself The Elder, so he says The Name. And they all knew immediately "for the sake of The Name". Gaius knew what he meant by "for the sake of The Name", and we know.

Now, if this is my imagination running riot, then just don't go with it. I'm wondering if at this point, an incident from the distant years came up back into John's mind, Jerusalem. When the authorities were putting pressure on the apostles, gunning for them, hauling them up before the Sanhedrin, and giving them a real drumming, and saying, "Now look, you have to stop this". And Peter, spokesman for them by the others standing by his side said, "Look, we must obey God, rather than men". And not knowing what to do with them, they eventually just said, "Well, listen to us. You do what you're told and we'll let you go." Now it reads, in Acts 5, "When they went away, they rejoiced. They rejoiced that they had been privileged to suffer for The Name." John is saying, "These men have gone forth for the sake of The Name." Just for him, not for themselves. They are not out to get anything. You see, other incident teachers went around fleecing the audiences, charging for the teaching they gave, but "These men, they're just going for him," John says, "Support them."

20:26

Secondly, he says, "They have taken nothing from the Gentiles." They have said, "We are servants of Jesus Christ, and we go forth in His name." That's it. Now obviously, they would not be supported by Jews, nor would they be supported by pagans. Now, it doesn't mean to say that if somebody offered them something, they wouldn't take it. I mean that's just not, what's the point. But they did not deliberately draw in funding from the Gentiles. So, John says, "Because of that, you make sure that you give them all the support and help you can", and then he says something else. He generalises it, notice what he says, "We, that is, we Christians, ought to..." Now, he's just said to Gaius, "Send them on their way in a manner worthy of God." Now he says, "We ought to give such men help, show hospitality to such men", and then he uses this amazing phrase, "so that we may work together for the truth."

What John is saying to us is this, I believe. You contribute, you give, you pray, you help, everyone that you can who is involved in this kind of work. You can't go, but you can

Transcript

become part of it. It's not everybody who can go out, as these men that go out, taking the work for the sake of The Name. But it is everybody who can have a share in this, can be involved in it, fellow workers with the truth. It's that tremendous. What an honour! This lifts praying and giving on to another plane altogether. It's no longer, it's no longer an obligation, a duty. No, this is a joy and delight, a privilege, to be involved in the greatest enterprise the world has ever known. So, we are encouraged, and it's no different for us today than it was in John's day, basically.

[DIOTREPHESES]

23:10

Now we come to this third person, big change of tone here, Diotrephes. Here we meet big trouble, and it is big trouble. Here's a flawed character, really a bit of a fraud.

Now the root trouble with Diotrephes, we are told right at the beginning, is this. He wants to be first. He's obviously got into, whether appointed I don't know, some position of leadership in his local Christian community. He's a strong, forceful personality, and he has determined that he is going to have his own way and will brook no rival. He comes first. What has he been doing?

First, just look at this catalogue, one, he's blocked a letter that John sent to the church. Now whether that means, when he got it, he said, "That's not going to be a read", he did that at least. Did he withhold it, or did he actually destroy it? That's possible. He was the kind of man who wasn't going to let an apostle get in his way. No way, I'm first.

24:44

Secondly, he's been gossiping maliciously about John. The word John uses interestingly 'he's talking nonsense.' These are fabricated lies, absolutely ridiculous, John is saying, and are wicked. Now here is a man who, for his own ends, is prepared to say the worst of things about the best of men. It's that shocking. John says, "When I come, I'll deal with this openly, before the church." You see, this couldn't be allowed to go on.

00:00

Then third, I think, in a sense it gets worse, he refuses to welcome the brothers. That is, when these itinerant teachers come along, with John's recommendation, of course, Diotrephes stands at the door and says, "You're not going in here. No place for you." I take it, he saw them as a big threat to himself, he said "You're not going in here. No way. You have to keep out." He didn't even let them sit at the back! Now, it may be that if somebody said to Diotrephes, "Why are you doing that?" It maybe he said, "Oh, well, you see, this is a matter of principle". People who act like this always take the grounds "it's a matter of principle". "Everybody else have prejudices, I have principles". But I want to say this to you, this exclusivism of Diotrephes is in its nature intolerable. These men are brothers, and he has no right to bar the way, absolutely none.

And then it gets worse, he doesn't only say "they're not getting in here", he's preventing others from welcoming them, and then he takes high-handed action in the church. He excommunicates them. He says, "Anybody who shows any support, fellowship with these people are out." This is dictatorship, not leadership. This is the complete

Transcript

autocrat, gone crazy. Such a man with such an attitude is a menace in any church. Selfish ambition has wrought havoc through in churches down through the centuries, and it always will, down to our own times.

27:29

I think it was Blaiklock² who said this, "Like the poor, those who wish to be first are always with us." It's odd how people will in a church want to have a place, above all, a place. Now, it's not just that that kind of action does harm. It runs counter to the teaching of the Lord Jesus. You know what he said about leadership. Out there in the world, the great folk in the Gentiles lord it over them, then he said this, "Not so among you." Leadership means this. A leader is a person who has to serve the people of God, not lord it over them. Because you see, only one has first place, only one is preeminent, only one is Lord. Jesus Christ is Lord.

Now this does not, when I'm saying all this, of course, it's not an encouragement for us to dodge responsibility in the church. I don't mean that. You don't say, "Oh well, I mean, I don't want to be first, I'm not first." No, no. But it does mean our whole attitude in service has to be one of serving him and serving his people without clamouring for first place. So, John gives advice which I believe is tied to that and leads on to the next passage. He says this to Gaius and to all of us, "Don't imitate what's evil, whatever you do." Never fall into the trap of saying, "It's my church and it must suit me." But rather imitate what is good. Because he says, "Anybody who does what's evil is no Christian at all, has not seen God." These are very strong words, but John does go in for strong words. So, we need to be careful in church fellowship to see that we act in a way that is worthy of the Lord, whose name we profess.

29:56

[DEMETRIUS]

But quickly come to number four, Demetrius. I say quickly because we're glad to leave the other fellow behind to come to this man, Demetrius. He's a shining example. He's a man who has a good reputation and testimony were told from everybody. But I want you to notice something. He's not because he's a great popular fellow who always has peace at any price and you know he will agree with anybody. Not that. John says a very interesting thing, which you need to puzzle over. He says this, "He has testimony born to him, even by the truth." What's that mean? Now some people say, "Ah, but you spell truth with a capital T here." This refers to one who is The Truth because it's only people who bear testimony. That's how we are looking at it. But let's take it with a small T. What does that mean? It means this. Not only do people speak well of him, but his life is true to the gospel as everybody can see.

Here is a man whose life is an open book and it's a good story. More than that, John adds his own testimony, says, "And I bear witness to him." Now because of that, some people think that Demetrius was actually the bearer of this little letter. Now, that's perfectly possible because you know that in those days when you wrote a letter, you had to get somebody actually to go all the way carrying it, delivering it. You didn't go

² The reference isn't certain but could be E M Blaiklock

Transcript

along, post it in the box, no such thing. So, it's probable that Demetrius was, and he was going to this church with this, had arrived at Gaius with this letter, and would be a positive inspiration both to Gaius and to all the other Christians.

32:15

He has an example that is worth following.

And John is saying, don't go with this other fellow Diotrephes. Here's the man you want to copy, be like this man Demetrius. Then John says something in his note, we can understand, he says, "Now I have a lot of things I want to say to you." Have you ever wished he would have gone on and said them? but we can understand. He says, "I don't want to put it in writing, I don't want to use pen and ink for this". Because pen and ink is a very cold way of communicating across the miles. It's a poor substitute. He's thinking about the value of personal conversation. You know what I mean? When you're sitting, talking to somebody, then your body language is there and they can say, what did you mean, such and such by that? And there's a certain amount of interchange. There's a warmth and an opportunity for expansion, which letter writing doesn't have. And he says, "In any case, I hope to see you soon", remember he said he was intending to come to the church, so he was intending to be there soon, if at all possible.

[FINAL GREETING - PEACE]

33:30

And then his final greeting, "Peace," he says, "Peace", the ancient, the Old Testament word 'shalom,' still used by Jews, of course, as you know. Shalom. Taken into the New Testament and enriched there, the word '*eirene*,' with all the fullness of well-being in God. That's what it means. Peace. All, just all the fullness of being well in God. That I wish you, he says. "Peace" he says.

And he says: "The friends here join in greeting." Notice he says: "the friends". Not the brethren, not the saints, just the friends. And I suppose you see, if he had said "the brothers", then people would have said "oh he means the few that were here." "That were in my house," Gaius might have said. But he doesn't mean that he says "All the friends. You're part of a bigger family. The friends all greet you." Then he says, "Greet the friends there". But did you notice the last few words? "Greet the friends there by name". By name, what does he mean? He means this. Make sure that every individual, every Christian, every individual is included in this greeting. Don't miss any of them out. Single them out. Make sure they're all in this. You see, this is against the background of the exclusivism of this other fellow.

John says, "In the Christian family, we embrace all the Lord's people." One by one, name by name, as individuals precious to him and, therefore, dear to us.

35:48

I think this little letter really drives home in simple words and simple phrases, all the teaching of the first three letters of John and especially first John. It talks about true faith, being loyal to the truth, believing what is true. That's what first John says. "Confessing Jesus Christ, come in the flesh, believing the truth." And then there's true

Transcript

behaviour, living by the truth, living up to the gospel. And then there is true love, embracing our fellow believers in the bonds of Christian love. What this little letter is saying to you and me, putting it quite simply as we go into this week, we are all called to be full-time Christians.

[END OF SERMON]

36:51

Let's pray.

Lord, we thank You. We thank You for Your kindness and grace to us, for the love You have shown us, and for the love You beget in us. Help us to develop this more and more. And enable us in this week to live lives worthily of the gospel, worthy of You. For Your glory and the blessing of other people in the name of the Lord Jesus, Amen.