

Bradford Houdyshel

Title: “The 3rd Epistle of John”

Key verse: 3rd John 3-4 (NASB) – “For I was very glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, that is, how you are walking in truth. ⁴I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.

Good morning, everyone. I have a question for you. When was the last time you heard a message on the 3rd Epistle of John? Two weeks ago, I asked a similar question to you, asking when was the last time you heard a sermon on the 2nd Epistle of John. These short, one-chapter epistles often get overlooked, so I have decided to introduce you to them. They are here in our New Testament, and so there must be a significant message that God wanted to teach us through these letters, even though they are so short. Two weeks ago, I presented a sermon on 2nd John and today I will present 3rd John to you.

Two weeks ago, I also introduced you to the author of these epistles: the Apostle John, one of the original 12 disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. It appears that he was the youngest of the 12 disciples, and he lived to quite an old age. He is considered to be the author of five New Testament books, all written toward the end of the first century A.D., perhaps between the years AD 85 and AD 95 or 96. These five books are: the Gospel of John, the three epistles of John, and the Revelation. We call these books the “Johannine Literature,” since they were authored by John. According to tradition, in his later years, the Apostle John was ministering in the city of Ephesus and, apparently, he had oversight of the churches in the surrounding region. The letters of 2nd and 3rd John were written to churches in this region – perhaps both letters were written to the same church. In these two letters, John refers to himself as “the Elder,” rather than using his name.

Let’s look at the opening line of both 2nd John and 3rd John.

2nd John, verse 1 (NASB) – “The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth.”

3rd John, verse 1 (NASB) – “The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.”

One thing I notice when I read the opening greeting of both epistles is how important the topic of truth is to John – both love and truth.

The epistle of 2nd John is addressed to “the chosen lady.” For several reasons that I told you about two weeks ago, this “chosen lady” is probably not a reference to a particular woman but is the way John is addressing a church congregation. The letter is addressed “to the chosen lady and her children.” The chosen lady is the congregation as a whole, and the children are the individual church members.

In 3rd John, the Elder is addressing a man named Gaius. Some people have wondered if this is the same man named Gaius who is mentioned in Romans 16 and 1st Corinthians 1; however, most Bible commentators say that it is not the same person – he is a different person named Gaius and we don’t really know anything more about him than what is mentioned here in this letter. He apparently had some role to play in his local church, but probably not the pastor.

While I was researching the background to these epistles, I learned an interesting theory that I would like to share with you. According to this theory, the three epistles of John – 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John – may have originally been delivered together as a set, a package of three documents to one church – to the church addressed as the “chosen lady” in 2nd John. And perhaps Gaius is an important person in that church. Maybe we have here a personal letter to Gaius (that’s 3rd John), plus a letter written to the congregation as a whole (that’s 2nd John), and then appended to this package is 1st John, which actually is a rather unusual document among the New Testament epistles. First John contains no opening and closing greetings, which is something that is found in practically all New Testament epistles. The author of 1st John does not identify himself in any way, unlike 2nd and 3rd John which come from a man who calls himself “the elder.”

It is quite striking that 1st John does not contain the author’s name nor any greetings. Let me show you an example of a typical opening and closing of a New Testament epistle.

Let’s look at Philippians 1:1-2 (NASB) – “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

This is a very typical way that New Testament epistles open.

The epistle to the Philippians ends in chapter 4, verses 21-23 – “Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

This is a typical ending.

But 1st John is very different. There are no opening or closing greetings, nor does the author identify himself. Let’s look at the beginning and the end of that document.

1st John 1:1-2 (NASB) – “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life— ² and the life was revealed, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was revealed to us.”

The epistle ends with a final exhortation, not greetings. Chapter 5, verse 21 – “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.”

1st John is very sermonistic in tone, and since it is without the typical greetings, there is that theory I mentioned to you a moment ago: that perhaps 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John were part of a single package sent to one church and that 1st John was a sermon or a pamphlet attached to the two small epistles addressed to the chosen lady and to Gaius. I find this an attractive theory, so I mention it to you. I read about it in the ESV Study Bible – if you have a copy of that study Bible then you can read about this theory in the introduction to 3rd John.

Well, now let us look in detail at 3rd John, with a little review of 2nd John. These two little epistles have some similarities and some differences. If you recall, when I presented my message on 2nd John two weeks ago, I divided the letter into three parts:

1. Walking in truth.
2. Walking in love.

And then the tone of the letter changes and we have:

3. Warning against deceivers.

In 3rd John, we again see truth and love mentioned. Then the tone of the letter changes and there is some discussion of a troublesome man who is a part of the church.

I have divided this letter into three parts:

1. Be walking in the truth.
2. Faithfully support visiting Christian ministers.
3. Do not imitate what is evil but what is good.

Let's read the entire epistle. By the way, scholars point out that this is the shortest epistle in the New Testament. In the Greek text, there are only 219 words.

3rd John 1-15 (NASB) – “The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

² Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers. ³ For I was very glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, that is, how you are walking in truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.

⁵ Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; ⁶ and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. ⁷ For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸ Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth.

⁹ I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. ¹⁰ For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.

¹¹ Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God. ¹² Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.

¹³ I had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink; ¹⁴ but I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face.

¹⁵ Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.”

Part 1: Be walking in the truth.

3rd John 3-4 (NASB) – “For I was very glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, that is, how you are walking in truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”

John, the elder, mentions his “children.” This may be a reference to people that he himself led to Christ, or it may refer to Christians that he feels responsible to care for since he has some spiritual oversight over the churches in this region.

Notice in these verses the crucial importance of “walking in truth.” This was an important theme in 2nd John as well, which we saw two weeks ago.

2nd John 4 – “I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth, just as we have received commandment to do from the Father.”

It is so important to be walking in the truth. This doesn't just mean standing on the true, fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. It also means living by those truths, living according to the precepts found in the Scriptures, where we find God's will revealed to us. We are to be living God-honoring lives.

One of my Bible commentaries says this:

"Walking in the truth" indicates that truth is both what we believe and how we live. It is doctrine and duty, creed and conduct. The wonderful Baptist preacher Vance Havner used to say: "What we live is what we believe. Everything else is just religious talk."
(Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 38, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), p. 225.)

Let me repeat some of these thoughts here:

"Truth is both what we believe and how we live."

"It is doctrine and duty ... creed and conduct."

What we live is what we believe.

That means: the way you live shows other people what you believe in and what is important to you. If you center your life around the Bible and seek to live by its precepts, you show what is important to you. In contrast, if you claim to be a Christian but have no interest in drawing close to God or living by Christian morals, someone may question if your profession of faith is real. That is the hard-hitting message of the 1st epistle of John.

Let's read 1st John 1:5-7 (NASB) – "This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; ⁷ but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin."

God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness. As God's children, we are expected to walk in the light and walk in the truth. If we walk in the darkness of sin, then our claim to be Christian is a lie. Walking in darkness means that you are not practicing the truth. It is the Apostle John's great desire that his spiritual children walk in the truth, walk in the light. When we confess our sins (as 1st John 1:9 says), we receive forgiveness of sins and become God's children. Henceforth, our lives should be marked by a God-honoring lifestyle characterized by truth, love, forgiveness, and godly behavior.

1st John 1:9 (NASB) – "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

So, that is Part 1: Be walking in the truth.

Now, let's move on to Part 2: Faithfully support visiting Christian ministers.

3rd John 5-8 (NASB) – "Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; ⁶ and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. ⁷ For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸ Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth."

Verse 5 mentions “brethren,” some of whom are “strangers” to this local church. This is a reference to traveling evangelists who were sent out by John to preach in various churches in the surrounding region. Some of these evangelists have come to Gaius’s church and ministered there – some of these visiting ministers were known to Gaius but others were strangers to him. Nonetheless, because they had been sent out by John, Gaius welcomed them and in verse 5 John commends him for acting faithfully in providing for these visitors’ needs and giving them opportunity to share their message with his congregation. In verse 6, we read that these ministers returned to John with a positive testimony of Gaius’s love for these Christian brothers. He welcomed them, and then he helped them as they proceeded on their evangelistic journey.

In verse 7, John points out that these brethren were sent out on their evangelistic mission “for the sake of the Name” – that means for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. They neither sought nor accepted financial support from the pagans. In verse 8, John states that Christians should support such ministers, since by doing so, we participate in their good work of spreading the truth of the gospel.

This reminds me of a passage of Scripture that I am rather fond of – it’s in the Apostle Paul’s second epistle to the Corinthians.

2nd Corinthians 8:1-5 (NASB) – “Now, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, ² that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. ³ For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave voluntarily, ...”

To the brothers and sisters in Corinth, Paul describes his appreciation for the churches in Macedonia, which despite various hardships and despite their deep poverty, they liberally provided financial support to their Christian brethren.

Let’s continue reading, starting with verse 3 again – “For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave voluntarily, ⁴ begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints [i.e., God’s people], ⁵ and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.”

Beyond their ability they voluntarily provided support to the saints, to God’s people. Beyond that, they were actually extremely eager to participate in supporting the saints. And what is even more amazing to Paul is that before the Macedonian Christians gave offerings of financial support, they first offered up their own selves to the Lord. They offered up themselves to the Lord, and to Paul and his co-laborers.

This is how it should be. We give our whole selves – our hearts and minds and energy – to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. After we have done that, then all other giving, including financial offerings, is easy to do.

When we financially support Christian ministers, we participate in their ministry.

Let’s now move to Part 3, where the tone of John’s letter changes.

Part 3: Do not imitate what is evil but what is good.

3rd John 9-11 (NASB) – “I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. ¹⁰ For this reason, if I come, I will call

attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.¹¹ Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.”

There is a man named Diotrephes in the church and he is a troublemaker. We are not told which church this is. It might be the same church that Gaius is a part of, or it may be another church in a nearby region that Gaius is aware of. We don't know what kind of leadership position Diotrephes has, but he had some amount of persuasive power and was able to exercise it in the church. He is someone who loves having a prominent position in the church and is evidently motivated by selfish ambition rather than what is good for the church and what is good for the propagation of the gospel. This is not the type of person we would want to have in church leadership, but unfortunately it has often happened in church history that people with selfish ambition have managed to obtain positions of church leadership, whether official or unofficial. In verse 10, we read that this man Diotrephes has unjustly accused the Apostle John himself with some wicked words. In addition, he did not receive the traveling evangelists that John had sent to visit the church. Indeed, when members of that congregation tried to receive these brethren, Diotrephes refused to let them do so, and he even threw those members out of the church. John indicates that he will visit that church and speak up against this man's harmful words and actions.

Diotrephes is not the type of man you want in church leadership. Let's read what the Apostle Paul wrote in his epistle to Titus on the character qualities desired in a church leader. Titus 1:7-8 (NASB) – “For the overseer must be beyond reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not overindulging in wine, not combative, not greedy for money,⁸ but hospitable, loving what is good, self-controlled, righteous, holy, disciplined.”

The pastor or overseer must be “beyond reproach.” He must not be “self-willed.” He must not be “combative.” Instead, he must be hospitable, self-controlled, holy, and disciplined.

The Apostle Peter has something to say as well.

1st Peter 5:1-3 (NASB) – “Therefore, I urge elders among you, as your fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and one who is also a fellow partaker of the glory that is to be revealed:² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not with greed but with eagerness;³ nor yet as domineering over those assigned to your care, but by proving to be examples to the flock.”

Here is what Peter exhorts elders to do. Shepherd the flock of God, exercising oversight ... without greed ... and in verse 3: not “domineering over those assigned to your care, but by proving to be examples to the flock.”

Shepherds should care for the flock, not be domineering over it. Shepherds should be examples to the flock: examples of how to live the Christian life – with love and humility and godliness. Shepherds should model Jesus Christ to the people.

Well, let us return to 3rd John. Let's read verse 11 again – “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.”

Do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Don't imitate Diotrephes. Imitate what is good. Jesus is our supreme role model. We can also look to godly men and women as role models. The Apostle Paul wrote this in 1st Corinthians 11:1 (NASB) – “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.”

Let's read Hebrews 13:7 (NASB) – “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their way of life, imitate their faith.”

Let's go back to 3rd John and look at verse 12, where we read about one man who is doing good.

3rd John 12 (NASB) – “Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.

It seems that Demetrius is being sent to this church by John. Most likely, Demetrius is the man who hand-delivered this letter to Gaius. John commends Demetrius as a man with a good testimony, a man who walks by the truth.

Let's read John's closing remarks.

3rd John 13-15 (NASB) – “I had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink; ¹⁴ but I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face. ¹⁵ Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.”

The elder ends 3rd John in a similar way that he ended 2nd John: with a statement that there is more he could write, but he prefers to share the comments in person, face to face. The elder expects to see Gaius in the near future.

I have come to the end of my message today. I will close with a reminder of the three exhortations that made up the outline of today's sermon, plus one additional exhortation:

Be walking in the truth: right doctrine and godly lifestyle.

Faithfully support Christian ministers. In doing so, you participate in their ministry.

Do not imitate what is evil but what is good.

And to church leaders, I will repeat this exhortation. Do not be domineering over the flock. Shepherds should be examples to the flock: examples of how to live the Christian life.