

# To Encourage, to Condemn, to Commend

## 3 John

This third and last Epistle of the Apostle John, as it was written in the Greek, is the shortest of all the books in the New Testament. It has a very personal feel and message to it as John writes –

- To encourage one brother,
- To condemn the actions of another individual, and
- To commend another.

Four individuals here (including the Apostle) and it is amazing how much drama we find in these short 14 verses.

The timing and the place of this letter is totally unknown. Although he gives us their names we have no way of thoroughly identifying the three individuals. We have no other identifying markers.

So, we might ask, what's the importance of this letter? I would say that it is at least three fold –

1. We will see a clear difference between those walking in the Spirit of God, verses those who are not.
2. We will see that there have always been those within the Church, who hold some authority or power within the Church, yet they are prideful and more focused on their own position and power than they are for the good of the Church.
3. There are multitudes of unsung heroes of the faith, who will have a great reward in heaven, even though the world may not even know their name.

As in 2 John, once again the writer introduces himself, yet without a name – in actuality we will find a lot of things within 3 John that parallel 2 John. One thing we did speak about in 2 John was the fact that no names were used at all, very possibly due to ongoing personal persecution against the Apostle. Yet here in 3 John he does give the name of the three other individuals, but his own name is once again referred to as “the

Elder”. And once again, the Church through history has agreed that it was the Apostle John who wrote this book.

As John writes this letter, in very similar fashion as 2 John, it would seem that **TRUTH** is a very important focus in his life and what he feels the Church and the Believers ought to be demonstrating –

- In verse 1, he speaks of loving in Truth
- In verses 3 and 4 he writes of walking in the Truth
- In verse 8 he is an encouragement for all of us to become fellow workers for (or in) the Truth

Along with **Truth** is the term of address that the Apostle repeatedly directs to Gaius: “**Beloved**”. It comes from the Greek word *agapeto tō agapētō* (“the beloved”), related to the verb *agapō* (**I love**).<sup>1</sup>

The attachment John has with Gaius is that of a genuine godly love, filled with care and concern for every aspect of his friend’s life – spiritual and physical. It is a complete and true expression of mature Christian love for a Brother or a Sister. In these short 14 verses, John addresses Gaius on four separate occasions with the phrase *tō agapētō* (“the beloved”)

- *To the beloved Gaius* (vs 1)
- *Beloved, I pray that you may prosper* (vs 2)
- *Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do* (vs 5)
- *Beloved, do not imitate what is evil* (vs 11)

There is a care and connection here between these two Christian men that speaks volumes. I believe it is an important part of the reasoning behind this letter. Something was wrong, someone was going astray, and the Apostle wanted to be certain to encourage and warn his friend in reference to the wrong and the wrong doer.

Let’s look at the letter –

---

<sup>1</sup> Zane C. Hodges, “3 John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 912.

<sup>1</sup> *The Elder, to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth:* <sup>2</sup> *Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.*

Although the normal opening would have been a declaration of the name of the author, a direction or address to whom it is written and then the normal *grace and peace* or *grace, mercy and peace*, the Apostle goes in a bit of a different direction.

Undoubtedly, Gaius knew who the letter was from, even if John had not stated “*The Elder*”. With the depth that we’ve already spoken about and that we shall see in the letter, there would have been no doubt Gaius would have known this was his dear friend John writing to him. Just as in a phone call or any communication from a dear friend or close family member, you don’t really need an introduction, “*Hi, this is David, your best friend since High School calling...*”

The greeting John gives to Gaius brings about a very powerful word picture.

*To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth...*

Not only does it speak of the fact that this is no feigned or false affection – John really does care for him deeply; but it also speaks of the purity of this love – it is a true and godly love that he has for this brother. He cares about him in a pure and godly sense, and we dare not try to make anything else of it.

Even the prayer John offers is an interesting and powerful phrase –

*Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.*

Perhaps John was acquainted with some personal issues Gaius was dealing with. Perhaps he was suffering financially or with bad health, either due to persecution or simply due to the fact that we live in a fallen world and we are susceptible to the ills of this world. Maybe John had heard about some issues in his life and so the prayer for prosperity and health.

But even at that, don’t walk away from this believing that John was more concerned about Gaius’ health and wealth more than he was about his spiritual wellbeing. As a

matter of fact, John is using the reality of Gaius' spiritual wellbeing to draw up the status of his health and wellbeing.

As a matter of fact, in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century mindset, we all too often think about prospering as dealing with the size of our houses, our check books and our 401k's, when in reality, the word used here in verse 2 speaks more about the overall wellbeing of an individual, even to the point of safety and ease in travel (*i.e. "go well of your journey"*).

But let's not get too far from the point of the matter, apparently Gaius' spiritual wellbeing was both evident and healthy. Undoubtedly, Gaius was flourishing or prospering spiritually. John was simply praying that in the same way as you are prospering in the spirit, may you also prosper in your way and be of good health.

That begs the question in reference to our own lives: How well would we be doing in our physical wellbeing and health if it matched our *spiritual wellbeing and health*?

Think about it for a moment: how incapacitated or sickly would we be if our physical wellbeing were to equal our spiritual wellbeing?

Perhaps for some of us the Apostle would pray,

*"I pray that you would become as spiritually well-nourished and healthy as you are physically."*

*"I pray that you would strive to be as rich and well off spiritually and eternally, as you are in this physical, temporary world."*

John's prayer for Gaius was based upon the spiritual maturity of the brother. That same prayer cannot be made for everyone.

John had heard reports from others about the spiritual life of Gaius. The testimony of his life had made itself known as he interacted with other brothers in the Lord.

*<sup>3</sup> For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. <sup>4</sup> I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.*

I cannot imagine a pastor "worth his salt" that could read that passage and NOT say a hardy, "AMEN".

To hear that someone close to you, perhaps someone you had the opportunity to disciple or at least pour into spiritually was –

- Doing well in the Lord
- Was maturing in their faith
- Walking according to the true Word of God, and
- Living a life of truth before God and man

What a blessing that is to hear that those who you had impact on in the past are still doing well today. Perhaps you were a Sunday School teacher, a Bible study leader, just a brother or sister in the Lord sharing your walk with a younger Believer, or even leading someone to Christ, then years later you see that individual or you hear about them from someone else... everything you hear brings a smile to both your face and your heart as you learn that from the time back when they were with you, they continued on in this journey called Christian maturity.

Perhaps for you, you're the Gaius and there are men and women like the Apostle John in your life. Those who have poured out their lives into you and today your walk in Christ is a direct result of the fact that they didn't give up on you in your times of weakness, they didn't walk away from you in your times of struggle and doubt. Their love and concern for you, as deep as that of the Apostle for Gaius caused them to stay the course and continually encourage you in the faith.

Have you taken the time of late to drop them a note, a text a Facebook shout-out? Maybe tonight the Lord might lay that on your heart. Because when they hear that good news, they would no doubt say with the Apostle –

*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.*

Let someone know this week that they have been influential in your spiritual walk, their work of love and faith with you hasn't been wasted or stolen by the enemy.

Apparently there were those who had either been sent out by the Apostle or that he had been made aware of. As those missionaries or messengers came into the area of Gaius, he had treated them properly and with solid Christian love and care.

<sup>5</sup> *Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers,* <sup>6</sup> *who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well,* <sup>7</sup> *because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles.* <sup>8</sup> *We therefore ought to receive such that we may become fellow workers for the truth.*

As these travelers had come into the care of Gaius, he treated them as he should.

There was true hospitality that was exercised towards these brethren, even though they may have been strangers and unknown to Gaius personally. They came as ambassadors of the Lord and Gaius treated them as such. And so John commends him for his care and uses Gaius' example as to how we should treat those who have come our way in service to the Lord.

In addition to the attitude we should have as Christians, there was also a cultural attitude in the Middle East at that time (and even today) that we need to remember.

Here is a portion of a 1986 article about hospitality in the Mediterranean/Near Eastern world by B.J. Malina, "*The Received View and What It Cannot Do: III John and Hospitality*," *Sem* 35 (1986): 171–94. Colin Kruse provides a summary of the article in his commentary "Letters of John", 215–16:

*Hospitality might be defined as the process by means of which an outsider's status is changed from stranger to guest.... (Hospitality) is not something a person provides for family or friends but for strangers. (Strangers) need such hospitality, for otherwise they will be treated as nonhuman because they are **potentially a threat to the community**. Strangers had no standing in law or custom, and therefore they **needed a patron in the community** they were visiting.... Hospitality was **not reciprocated between individuals** ... but it was **reciprocated between communities**. And it was to the strangers' own community that they were obliged to sing the praises of their hosts if they had been treated well (cf. 3 John 5–8) and to which they would report adversely if they had not been welcomed properly (cf. 3 John 9–10).*

*Communities would repay hospitality to strangers from another community if that community had treated their own people well. Letters of recommendation were important*

*in the matter of hospitality. Their function was to help **divest the stranger of his strangeness**... To refuse to accept those recommended was to **dishonor the one who commended them**, and in the Mediterranean culture of the first century the one dishonored had to seek satisfaction or bear the shame heaped upon him by the refusal of his commendation.*

So, with that understanding in mind, let's continue our look at 3 John, now in verse 9 –

*<sup>9</sup> I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. <sup>10</sup> Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.*

In these short two verses, there is a lot of drama going on. We don't have the whole of the issue, but we have enough to help us to correctly fill in some of the blanks.

Rather or not the Church that Gaius was a part of was also the Church John writes of here or not is not for certain, but it would seem to be the situation. Who exactly this Diotrephes is, is not certain, but there are some things stated that help us in drawing conclusions which should not be too far off the mark.

Apparently John had written a letter to this Church, as to the contents of the letter we don't have any clues, but apparently Diotrephes rejected the letter and the message of the letter. John does speak of some brethren who also were not received personally by Diotrephes and perhaps the letter was simply a letter of recommendation. There seems to be a very rebellious or contentious streak about Diotrephes.

As we just read, "*Letters of recommendation were important in the matter of hospitality. Their function was to help **divest the stranger of his strangeness**... To refuse to accept those recommended was to **dishonor the one who commended them**.*"

Rather it was a letter of recommendation or simply a letter of instruction to the Church, Diotrephes rejects the letter, thus rejecting the authority of the Elder, the Apostle John. Whatever Diotrephes' position was in the Church, he had put himself in the position *to*

*have the preeminence among them.* And so he rejected the letter, the Apostle and the visiting brethren.

There is little doubt but that Diotrephes had coerced others within the Church to allow him to have the authority he so greatly desired. Others within the Church would have had to accept his ego driven personality and submitted to his prideful ways in order for him to continue to have any kind of authority.

That's a sad position for a Church to get into. Abusive leadership should never be tolerated – rather it be in the First Century or in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In his rejection of the letter, the Apostle and the visiting brethren, Diotrephes places himself **above all of them**, looking for his own glorification and putting himself in the position of authority. We also read that he gossips, using *malicious words*, undoubtedly building his case with an unsuspecting and already submissive Church Body. His attitude is causing a spirit of separation and division from the rest of the Body of Christ, so John tells Gaius he will soon take care of the situation personally.

*<sup>10</sup> Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church*

John warns Gaius, not to act like Diotrephes, Don't let him suck you into his evil ways by trying to match evil for evil –

*<sup>11</sup> 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.*

John fairly plainly lays out his take on Diotrephes – *he who does evil has not seen God.* Even as Jesus, Himself declared in Luke 6 –

*<sup>43</sup> "For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>44</sup> For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. <sup>45</sup> A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*

Diotrephes, even though an apparent leader in the Church doesn't show the fruits of being a Believer -- *he who does evil has not seen God.*

As John finishes up this short letter, he ends on a positive note and a positive word about a good Brother who has a good testimony of Christ in his life – a complete opposite of Diotrephes is the young man Demetrius –

*<sup>12</sup> 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.*

We don't know anything about Demetrius other than what we read right here. But apparently the Apostle knew him and in the context of what we read here, apparently Gaius was familiar with the young man. Some have said he may have been the courier of the letter from the Apostle to Gaius.

But what I want you to see here is that Demetrius *has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself...* There was nothing in this man's life that could be spoken against him. Those that knew him spoke well of him. His life was a testimony of the truth.

There are a lot of Demetrius' in the world. The world may not know their names, but the testimony of their lives speaks volumes. And although the world may not know your name, the Lord has plans on giving you a new name anyway. And if the only place your name ever gets published is in the Lamb's Book of Life, then you have reason for rejoicing.

John had a lot to say, but just as in 2 John, he didn't want to send a text message or an email, he wanted to share it in person –

*<sup>13</sup> I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink; <sup>14</sup> 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.*

