

## **FRIENDSHIP & FAITHFULNESS: THE THIRD EPISTLE OF JOHN**

### **Week One: John & His Friend (3 John 1:1-2)**

*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. (3 John 1:1-2)*

The third epistle of John, which the apostle wrote to his friend Gaius, is one of the shortest books in the Bible. Yet despite its brevity and simplicity, it holds an important message about Christian friendship. Christians are able to form genuine, lasting friendships based on the truths of the gospel - and when both sides of such a friendship remain faithful to God and his Word, that relationship can withstand any earthly trouble and can last for eternity.

In this epistle, John encourages us with the possibilities of Christian relationships, and he also calls us to embrace the foundations of true fellowship, while warning us to turn away from the things that cause worldly friendships to crumble.

John wrote this letter later in his life, probably around AD 90. At the time he was one of the last remaining links to the generation of Jesus himself, and he was almost certainly the last surviving member of the Twelve apostles. Because of John's near-legendary status, he could identify himself simply as "the elder" (verse 1). Yet even the beloved disciple, the great apostle of love, was no longer universally appreciated.

Late in the 1st century AD, new doctrines without biblical or apostolic support were becoming influential, many church leaders had begun using the church to accumulate power for themselves rather than teaching grace and truth, and many believers were becoming derailed by these and other problems. Though many believers still loved and appreciated John, there were powerful and influential persons in the church who considered him to be no longer relevant or useful. We see both sides of this in John's epistle, as he works to instill in his friend a perspective that will keep him faithful to God alone.

John's greeting to his friend shows his deep and sincere concern for others (verse 2). John prays both for Gaius's physical health and also for his spiritual health. The apostle knows that we must all live for a time in this world, and that we all have earthly needs - which a true friend will care about. Yet John also knows that spiritual health is even more important. So he is a true friend to Gaius, giving him both encouragement and instruction. Their friendship is fellowship in its truest form, for it is based on something greater than either of them.

The friendship between John and Gaius is not based on something ungodly like mutual hatred for a common imagined enemy, nor is it based on something trivial like the desire to show off for each other. It is built on their mutual dependence on the cross. The truest friendships arise from this awareness and appreciation of the grace and blood of the cross of Jesus.

*- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, (revised), May 2013*

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### **Week Two: No Greater Joy (3 John 1:3-4)**

*It gave me great joy to have some brothers 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. (3 John 1:3-4)*

After his greeting, John shares with his friend Gaius how happy he was to hear from others about Gaius's faithfulness to the truth (verse 3). John has been proclaiming the gospel for over 50 years, and he has seen many persons respond with joy to the news of the cross. Many of these have remained faithful for a lifetime, but many others turned back to the world. John's own life has been full of tumultuous events, the passing of dear friends, and the suffering of persecution.

So John knows both the costs and the rewards that come with faithfulness to the gospel. In his thoughts about friends like Gaius, what matters most to him is to know whether his friends (and especially his 'children', believers whom he personally taught) are remaining true to Jesus.

John's perspective is worthy of reflection and emulation (verse 4). In a world that constantly reminds us of fleshly desires and ambitions, and that constantly tempts us to indulge in them, it is difficult to put spiritual needs first. Even faithful Christians must often wrestle in prayer and study in order to remember that the rewards of faithfulness are far greater than the mere short-term satisfaction that our flesh may get from giving in to the desires of our weak flesh.

Consequently, one of the greatest acts of love we can perform for one another in Jesus is to encourage those who are faithful to the truth, and who do not give in to the hatred, anger, selfish ambition, materialism, and other sins that surround us every day. To those who do allow the world's crudeness to overcome them, we are called to provide patient, loving exhortation as we remind them to live for spiritual fruit and not for the flesh's desires.

John's example calls us to consider our own perspective in our relationships, especially with our brothers and sisters in Jesus. If we genuinely believe that the most important thing for each of us is to remain faithful to God, then we shall be willing to give our friends what they need - though that may sometimes be different from what they desire.

When we love one another, we can learn to 'speak the truth in love' even when this means exposing the falsehood of popular 'religious' beliefs or turning away from the false comfort of platitudes and pat answers to difficult questions. This will always be difficult in a world that "is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19), but this is how we know whether we truly care for others, or whether we only hope to gain their approval.

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### **Week Three: Friendship & Ministry (3 John 1:5-8)**

*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. (3 John 1:5-8)*

The apostle is very happy to know that Gaius's friendships with other Christians are not merely social, but also include ministry and sacrifice (verses 5-6). His example of ministry and service brings John added joy. So once again this simple epistle provides us with a clear and practical example of what fellowship truly means. Gaius did not seek to gain something from others, but instead looked for something he could give to them.

We cannot be certain whom John means by "the brothers" - this could have been a group of Christian visitors sent out by John himself, or it could have been one of the groups of travelling missionaries who were so common in the first century church of Jesus. And their precise identity doesn't matter - what does matter is that in either case Gaius seized the opportunity to look after their needs and to show hospitality.

John emphasizes that Gaius served them even though he knew none of them personally, thereby demonstrating his love for God and his devotion to the truth. Gaius is a good example to follow, because it is human nature to make risk/reward calculations before we serve, give, or participate. Gaius simply recognized some brothers in Jesus, and showed them God's grace.

Although Gaius seems to have been neither a missionary nor any other kind of designated 'leader', he became a valuable part of a worthwhile ministry (verses 7-8). His simple example is worth considering, because in the church there are two unhealthy but common views of ministry. Too often a church will look to the same few "talented" persons or "leaders" to take care of every need, instead of encouraging and equipping each believer to have a role in ministry. Yet on the other hand it is ungodly to try to force everyone into the same mold, evaluating everyone by the same artificial 'standard' instead of appreciating each part of the body for what it does.

"All" that Gaius had done was to show some simple hospitality to a few travelling brothers, yet his actions brought considerable joy to an old apostle who had seen and experienced so much in his long life. May we also learn to delight in the 'smallest' of things that our brothers and sisters are doing in the name of God. What matters is not how dramatic an act of ministry may be, or what kind of results it produces, or how much money is involved. The important thing is that it was done "for the sake of the Name".

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### **Week Four: How To Ruin Friendship & Fellowship (3 John 1:9-10)**

*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. (3 John 1:9-10)*

For all of the wonderful aspects of Christian relationships that John has shown us, there is another side that must be discussed (verse 9). It is much easier to destroy relationships than it is to build them, as both John and Gaius have learned through sad personal experience. They are both acquainted with a troublesome but influential church member named Diotrephes, who exemplifies some of the quickest ways to ruin Christian fellowship and Christian relationships.

This Diotrephes combines a self-serving, self-important attitude with a willingness to gossip and manipulate others in order to build himself up. He is the kind of church 'leader' that had become common late in John's life, and that has been all too common in every era since then. There is no place in genuine Christian ministry for selfishness, self-centeredness, or self-righteousness. And yet because these ungodly qualities often produce outward results, even believers all too often accord undue respect and allegiance to spiritual bullies like Diotrephes.

Diotrephes is proud, divisive, slanderous, and inhospitable, and yet his congregation honors him while rejecting John the apostle. It is common for even Christians to misinterpret aggressive behavior as spiritual strength. In reality, persons who rely in intimidation, conformity, and manipulation are deeply insecure - they should be lovingly helped to grow out of such childish habits, rather than accorded honor and position for them.

John is now faced with the problem of how to respond to Diotrephes' mistreatment (verse 10), yet ironically he may well have struggled with similar problems in his youth. The same apostle who, with his brother, was nicknamed a 'Son of Thunder', and who requested to be placed above all the other apostles, is now in the receiving end of far more hostile behavior. But while this particular congregation may be following Diotrephes, it is John the apostle of love, long ago cured of any desire to be first, who is our spiritual example to follow.

One of the basics of Christianity is that we must die to self. We must accept whatever blessings God has granted us, without begrudging others their blessings. We must deal openly and honestly with others, even when we think they are in the wrong - and we must resist the temptation to influence others' opinions through ungodly tactics like gossip or guilt. When we truly must correct or even confront someone, we must do it solely out of love for God's grace and truth, and thus must pursue the matter in grace and love - not as a battle of human wills that must be won or lost, but as a mutual effort to come to a better understanding of God's will and Word.

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### **Week Five: The Value Of Good Examples (3 John 1:11-12)**

*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. (3 John 1:11-12)*

Although Diotrephes was an example of everything we should avoid in our relationships, another believer, Demetrius, is an example of what is good and healthy. John contrasts these two to teach some general practical lessons to his young friend Gaius, to whom he is writing (verse 11).

John's saying that everyone who does what is good is from God, and that everyone who does evil is not from God, is similar to some statements in 1 John (for example, in 1 John 3:7-10). So this was likely a principle that John often emphasized in his teaching. He does not, of course, mean it in a narrow literal sense - in that case, since we all commit both sins and good deeds from time to time, we would bounce in and out of a relationship with God on an almost hourly basis.

A person with spiritual discernment can often tell whether someone is following Jesus (or some other philosopher or religion) by observing that person's life, behavior, and attitudes. Yet John means something even deeper, for is trying to help us see how the awareness of God (or the lack thereof) inevitably affects everything that we do, say, and think. Doing good things in ministry ought to be more than lifting ourselves up, while committing acts of hate or violence is worse than merely breaking a 'rule'. Such things implicitly show an acceptance or rejection of God.

As for Demetrius, it is interesting that we never learn what it is, specifically, that makes him such a good example (verse 12). Perhaps he was an outstanding servant, perhaps he was unusually active in helping others to have faith in Jesus, perhaps he was wisely known for generous hospitality, perhaps a little of all these things or something else entirely. It doesn't matter. There are many ways that we can show each other God's love and grace, and all of them are equally valued by God - "anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward" (Mark 9:41).

Instead of analyzing and debating which of our ministries is most important, we should simply take note of all the opportunities to give and serve, and make use of some of them as we are able. Not even Jesus met every need of every person around him, so there is no need to feel guilty (or to make others feel guilty) about the opportunities we miss - just remember what joy it brings God when we do pass along his compassion for humanity.

John also makes the interesting observation that "the truth itself" speaks well of Demetrius. Demetrius's life was not merely what worldly humans commonly call 'good' - it reflected the nature of God and of Jesus. Whatever he did, it was encouraging enough that we still read about him many centuries later. Such is the value and significance of a truly Christ-like example.

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### **Week Six: The Community Of Believers (3 John 1:13-14)**

*I have much to write to 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. (3 John 1:13-14)*

In John's simple but heartfelt closing to the epistle, he leaves us with a picture of a community of believers and friends whose fellowship in Christ has affected not only their individual lives, but also their relationships with one another. In the Scripture, contrary to much of human teaching, faithfulness to Jesus is closely tied to faithful friendships with others who also love God. Although the problems of the church often make us long to serve God away from the problems of others, God's Word calls us always to bear with each other and continue to follow him as one.

Because of how important this is to John, he indicates to his friend Gaius that their exchange of letters, though quite desirable in itself, is not as satisfying as the hope of seeing him personally at the next opportunity (verse 13). We often see these small yet significant indications of the value John places on his Christian friends. He also shows his priorities when he wishes Gaius peace, just as Paul so often wished grace, mercy, and peace to those who received his letters.

The best things we can wish for each other to have are not wealth, fame, power, or popularity; for those are meager blessings indeed when compared with spiritual blessings. Those who truly care for one another will wish each other most of all to have the peace of God, the love of God, and the grace of God.

John concludes with an exchange of greetings, referring to the believers with him and to those who are with Gaius simply as "friends" (verse 14). To John, a friend means much more than a mere acquaintance or colleague. Jesus once said to John and the other apostles, "you are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from the Father I have made known to you." (John 15:14-15) In saying this, Jesus laid a basis for true friendship that John would learn to follow for the rest of his long life.

Although the ideas in this epistle are simple, they give us much to think about in our own friendships. The world has its own ideas about friendship, revolving around shared self-interest, a common enemy, or fleshly indulgence. The world's ideas are a lot easier for our flesh to accept - but they are weak ideas and bad ideas. To God, friendship and faithfulness are meant to go together, as we share in the fellowship that we have been given as fellow believers in the truth of the gospel.

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