

Study 10: 3rd John Letter

Introduction

The third letter deals with a christian (Diotrephes) who was more concerned about his self standing than he was with serving God. John writes to a faithful member of the church (Gaius) to encourage him to remain faithful in his stand for truth. The letter is also a letter of commendation for a christian sent out by John (Demetrius) so that the church would receive him.

Body of the Study

Salutation and Greetings

Commendation for Gaius

Condemnation for Diotrephes

Commendation for Demetrius

Final Greetings

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read the letter again right through

What characteristics of Gaius are examples that we should follow in our lives?

What does it mean for us to show hospitality “in a manner worthy of God”? (3:1:6). What are some of the practical ways that we can do this? What practical steps can you take to develop a ministry of hospitality?

Notes for study 10: 3rd John Letter

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Salutation and Greetings

The first four verses form an introduction and personal greeting to Gaius. John uses the statement “Dear friend” (*agapetos* – beloved) four times in the letter, showing the close bond that he has with Gaius.

As in the second letter, John describes himself as “The elder” – *the old man* – but this time the letter is personal rather than addressed to a church. However, there is the distinct impression that it is intended to be read by the church, and not Gaius alone. “...*The Elder, To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth...*” (3:1:1 NKJV). As in the second letter, John uses the terms *love* and *truth* together. The idea of truth is used 7 times in the short letter, in addition to 2 mentions of *faithful*. This is a key message of the letter – being true to God, and being faithful to Him. It is accomplished in how we put our faith into practice – which is a problem specifically addressed in the letter.

The salutation is extended to a specific greeting to Gaius “...*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...*” (3:1:2 NIV). The greeting does not imply that Gaius was ill, and John is concerned for both his physical well-being and for his spiritual well-being. John commends him for his faithfulness – so we know that he was “spiritually” well.

John had heard a good report concerning Gaius “...*It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth...*” (3:1:3 NIV). The Gnostics were mis-representing God by falsely claiming to have power and authority. Whilst many had been deceived by this teaching, Gaius was one who had stood firm, not only for the true teaching (*faithfulness to the truth*), but also in putting it into practice (*continue to walk in truth*). John’s response to this news was *great joy*, and he continues with the statement “...*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth...*” (3:1:4 NKJV). As far as John is concerned, there is nothing greater than to hear the news of the faithfulness of the christians that he knows well (his *children*).

Commendation for Gaius

Gaius was active at putting his faith into practice, especially in the areas of hospitality “...*Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you...*” (3:1:5 NIV). He not only served the brethren where he was located, but he also served those who were travelling through that he had not previously known. The NKJV has a slightly different rendering “...*whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers...*” Hospitality lies at the core of the letter, and it is a practice that all christians are required to do (Mt 10:10; Ro 12:13; 1Ti 3:2; 5:10; Heb 13:2). But as we have already seen from the second letter, there were times when it was to be refused (2:1:10).

Gaius’ reputation for displaying hospitality was reported back to the church where John was located (Ephesus?) “...*They have told the church about your love...*” (3:1:6 NIV). Those who were travelling had received the benefits of the hospitality, and had reported the good things to others. John commends Gaius for his actions “...*You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God...*” (3:1:6 NIV).

However, unlike the false teachers that were to be denied hospitality and fellowship (2:1:10), these brethren were noble minded “...*It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving*

no help from the pagans..." (3:1:7 NIV). It appears that these people might have been missionaries who were supported by the brethren alone and *received no help from the Gentiles*, which is to say that they did not undertake secular work. As Christians, we not only have the responsibility to support such men (financially), but also to support them in-kind "...*We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth...*" (3:1:8 NIV). John explains the purpose of such hospitality *so that we might work together for the truth*. We share a common love of the truth, and a common ground. We want to spread the gospel, and together we can encourage one another (Heb 10:25) and share with one another how the Lord works through us. The NKJV has a slightly different rendering "...*so that we might become fellow workers for the truth...*"

Condemnation for Diotrephes

John had previously written to the church "...*I wrote to the church, but...*" (3:1:9 NKJV). This must have been an official letter, and may have been the letter we know as 2 John, or it may be a letter that is now lost. Diotrephes had a lot of influence over the church where Gaius met. We are not told what position Gaius had in the church (whether a leader or not). But we are told about Diotrephes "...*but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us...*" (3:1:9 NKJV). He was ignoring the things that were written by the Lord's apostles, and thus was ignoring the authority that had been given to them by the Lord (Jn 15:20). He liked to *rule-the-roost* and was trying to apply control when and where he had no business doing so. His motivation was not to serve God, but he wanted to be in the spotlight and serve himself. He may have suppressed the letter that John had written.

[As an aside here, John had to tell Gaius that he had written to the church. He could have used language along the lines of "Diotrephes has ignored the letter that I wrote" which would suggest that Gaius might have been aware of it. But on the contrary, John has to tell Gaius "I wrote to the church, but..." This suggests that Diotrephes had suppressed the letter and had refused to take the action that John had instructed].

Its contents are not, however difficult to imagine. On the basis of 3 John, we can surmise that he had written the church asking them to extend hospitality to the traveling missionaries he had sent out. It may also have included a request for support that would speed them on their way. Diotrephes chose to thwart John's intention by suppressing the letter or else opposing the request before the congregation. He also had threatened the expulsion of any in the church who were considering offering hospitality to the elder's emissaries. In fact, some may already have been forced out of the church. (NIVBC)

Diotrephes position is made clearer in the NIV rendering "...*(he) will have nothing to do with us...*" and so he must have rejected those whom John had sent, as well as John's authority.

The situation would be put right when John came to visit "...*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...*" (3:1:10 NIV). John spells out Diotrephes' actions: "malicious gossip"; "refusing to welcome the (travelling) brothers"; "stopping those who want to do so"; "putting them out of the church (for fellowshiping the travelling brethren)".

Exactly how John intended to deal with Diotrephes is unclear. His statement that he "will call attention to what he [Diotrephes] is doing" suggests that John planned to confront Diotrephes, perhaps personally, and expose his conduct before the whole church, unless he completely repented. There seems to be an implication that Diotrephes's misdeeds were not yet fully known to the congregation; and perhaps it was the elder's hope that once they were revealed, the church would either censure or expel Diotrephes from his position. ... It was no pleasant experience that awaited the elder, but "truth" without "love" is no truth at all. Diotrephes was condemned not because he violated sound

teaching regarding the person and nature of Jesus Christ but because his "life" was a contradiction to the truth of the Gospel. (NIVBC)

John, the great apostle of love, plans to deal sternly with Diotrephes. There is a clear message here that a "loving" attitude does not mean compromise with the truth. John is concerned about what the false teaching (and the false attitude from Diotrephes) might do to the faith and to the eternal salvation of those in the church, and also for Diotrephes' salvation. That is what showing true love is about. Jesus (*agape* love personified) also dealt sternly and uncompromisingly with the false teachers of His day (the Scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees).

Commendation for Demetrius

In direct contrast to Diotrephes, John exhorts (and encourages) Gaius to continue to stand for the truth in the face of the opposition that he must have had around him "...*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...*" (3:1:11 NIV). There is a clear message of distinction here between the two characters!

We know nothing more about Demetrius, except for the comments that are made about him here. He clearly had a good reputation "...*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...*" (3:1:12 NIV). John makes three statements about him:

1. He is well spoken of by everyone
2. He is well spoken of by the truth itself
3. We (John and the brethren at Ephesus (?)) speak well of him

To which John adds the comment "...*and you know that our testimony is true...*" Whilst some people might try to supply false credentials, or false references, this was not the case with Demetrius. They knew the source of the endorsement, and could have absolute faith in it.

With the suppression of the travelling Christians by Diotrephes, and the commendation and endorsement that John gives to Demetrius, we can assume that Demetrius must have been one of the missionaries sent out by John. Either he was planning to travel at some time in the future, or he was the carrier of the letter. If he was to come in the future, then the commendation would have said something along the lines of "*look after him when he comes*" (c/f Tit 3:12). Most likely then, Demetrius travelled with the letter, and it was his letter of endorsement from John to ensure that he received the welcome that he deserved in spite of the actions of Diotrephes.

In this commendation we see something of the way the early church protected itself from false teachers. Apostles and leaders sent representatives and teachers bearing letters of commendation from their hand to congregations known to them. See Acts 18:27; 2 Corinthians 3:1; Romans 16:1; Colossians 4:10.¹

Final Greetings

John has plans to visit the church in the near future, which would allow some of the issues to be dealt with personally. "...*I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink...*" (3:1:13 NIV). "...*I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face...*" (3:1:14 NIV). This is another way of saying that John wanted to deal with these things privately.

The letter closes with a brief greeting "...*Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name...*" (3:1:14 NIV).

¹ Roberts p. 181