

BIBLE COMPANION COMMENTARY:

3 JOHN

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PREFACE

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Duncan Heaster

3 JOHN CHAPTER 1

:1 *The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth*- The "beloved" may refer to how Gaius was beloved by the Father and Son, just as John has referred to himself in his Gospel as the disciple whom the Lord loved. John says that God's love for Gaius is his love for him; John loves Gaius "in truth", "in Christ" or "in the spirit" [of truth], as Paul would put it, as a reflection of the love which God had for Gaius. So John was practicing the theory he had taught in 1 Jn. 4; that we are to love our brethren with the love of the Father and Son for them. Gaius was John's convert, for he says he is the "elder" of Gaius.

:2 *Beloved, I pray that in all things you may prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers*- Gaius was John's convert (see on :1), and John believed that by praying for him he could influence his spiritual progress; see on 1 Jn. 5:16. John's prayer for the physical health of Gaius could imply he was sick- and at the very time he needed brotherly support, he had been excluded from his local church (see on :9,10). The question is whether the "all things" refer to secular things [contrasted apparently with "as your soul prospers"]; or whether "even as" [*kathos*] simply means 'according to', 'in so far as'. In which case, the fervent prayer [AV "I wish above all things that..."] is that Gaius is in good spiritual health. In this case, the typical opening of a letter is being subverted: for instead of wishing good health and material prosperity, John wishes "above all things" [AV] that Gaius is having spiritual health. For the

constant concern for secular health and prosperity should not be what we "above all things" are interested in. The only health and wealth worth anything are in spiritual terms.

:3 For I rejoiced greatly, when brothers came and testified to the truth which is in you, even as you walk in truth- The brothers appear to be a group of itinerant mission workers who went forth from John's home church, and visited converts like Gaius, bringing back reports to John as to how his converts were progressing. We see the huge importance attached to the spiritual growth of converts, rather than simply baptizing people and bragging about numbers. What was "within" believers and what they walked in was "the spirit", here called "the truth". The reference is to the Lord Jesus, "the truth", and more exactly to "the spirit of truth", the spirit of Christ, His living, thinking and breathing, which is given to all believers. The 'holding firm in the truth' which was in view is therefore not a retaining of some set of theologies; but rather continuing to allow "the spirit of truth", of the Lord, to abide within them, and having this as the guide of daily 'walking' and thinking.

Daniel speaks of repentance and obeying God's voice as being a result of 'having discernment in thy truth' (Dan. 9:13,14 RV). To grasp the endless depth and height of the fact we are in touch with ultimate truth inevitably affects our lives. 3 Jn. 3 in the AV speaks of "the truth that is in thee"; but the Greek can also mean, as in the RV, "thy truth". There is to be a close personal identification between us and the "spirit of truth", of the Lord Jesus personally. His spirit becomes our spirit, His truth is our truth. The outcome elicited by this is repentance, and our being truthful at the very least. Our contact with God's truth results in our being truthful not only to others but to ourselves, and this, as Daniel observed, gives rise to true repentance.

Paul can speak of "the word of the truth of the gospel" (Col. 1:5) and again of "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5). He refers to "the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation" (Eph. 1:13). It's quite Biblical that we refer to our faith as "the truth". But truth is clearly a way of describing or summing up the leading of the indwelling Spirit in a way of life which the doctrines of the truth should elicit in us. Thus "the new man... is created in righteousness and holiness of truth" (Eph. 4:24). We obey the truth in unfeigned love of our brethren (1 Pet. 1:22), not just by intellectual assent at a baptismal interview; we 'do the truth' in loving our brother (1 Jn. 1:6); if the spirit of truth is in us then we walk in it (3 Jn. 3).

:4 I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth- John's greatest joy was that his converts, and his convert's converts, 'walked in truth', they 'walked after [the Father's] commandments' (2 Jn. 4,6). Paul likewise speaks of how his converts are his "joy and crown". Joy in the Kingdom will not be a selfish thing; our joy will be in seeing the results of our labours for others in this brief life. We therefore need to give our all to such labour, for it has eternal consequence like nothing else we may put our hands to.

:5 Beloved, you do a faithful work in whatever you do toward those that are brothers and especially to strangers- As noted on :3, "the brothers" refer to the messengers of John's church who went around visiting his converts and spreading his gospel record, now found in the Gospel of John. The idea may be that he did well in entertaining the brothers, especially because they were strangers, unknown to him; or perhaps Gaius was a Jew and these visiting brethren were "strangers", Gentiles, and yet he still had them under his roof. This [as we learn from Acts 10] was quite contrary to Jewish culture. Gaius had materially supported them; and Diotrephes disfellowshipped those who did this (:10). So, Gaius was excommunicated for showing support to missionary workers from an individual [John] with whom Diotrephes had an issue. Such absurd behaviour is not unknown today. It is the power of the deadly evil of 'guilt by association'. "Especially to strangers" could mean 'bearing in mind that these brethren are strangers to you'; or it could refer to the fact that Gaius was generous and hospitable to strangers generally, including 'strangers' in the sense of Gentiles. Showing

hospitality to Gentiles was not much done in Judaism, and it may have been another reason why Diotrephes so hated Gaius. No good work goes unpunished, that is the lesson; and when we experience it, we are not alone. There is likely an allusion to Mt. 25:35, where the Lord taught that He was manifest in the "stranger" (s.w.) and to assist them was to assist Him. The Lord was manifest in these brethren; and likewise the way Diotrephes refused to assist them and excommunicated those who did was to be the ground of his condemnation at the last day. For he had not 'known' the Lord, and the Lord would tell him this at the last day. Our attitude to our brethren is our attitude to Him; and that truth must radically affect our positions, even if it involves being sanctioned because of them.

:6 *Who testify of your love before the church. You will do well to set them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God-* "The brothers", the mission workers sent forth by John to see his converts such as Gaius, had returned and testified to John and his home church of the love which Gaius had shown them, materially supporting them when Diotrephes and the former home church of Gaius had refused to do so, and had not fellowshipped them (:10). Setting someone forward on their journey suggests provision of material help towards them, which resulted in Diotrephes disfellowshipping those who did (:10). But Gaius is encouraged that he 'does well' in so doing, regardless of the position of Diotrephes. "A manner worthy of God" supports the suggestion on :5 that attitudes to these brethren was attitude to the Father and Son.

:7- see on 1 Pet. 4:14.

Because for the sake of the Name they went forth, taking nothing from the Gentiles- The brothers sent forth by John in pastoral and missionary work were obeying the great commission, to which this language clearly alludes; for that commission was a being sent forth to preach in the Lord's Name (Lk. 24:47). This is yet further evidence that the great commission applied not only to the eleven disciples. For the excellence of knowing His Name they went forth in witness, and moreover were generous spirited, not taking material help from unbelievers to enable this. The itinerant Judaist false teachers did take such support. The knowledge of the Name of itself should inspire to active service: for the sake of the Lord's Name the Ephesians laboured (Rev. 2:3).

:8 *We therefore ought to welcome such, that we may be fellow-workers for the truth-* 'Welcoming' implies material support, in the context here. I have suggested that "the truth" in John is a reference to the Lord Jesus and His "spirit of truth". The gift of the Comforter / Holy Spirit was particularly to empower the spreading of the Gospel. And yet the Spirit does not as it were zap people against their will. There needs to be an exercise of the human volition; we work together with the Spirit, and with the Lord Jesus who gives it. We are labourers together with Him (1 Cor. 3:9). The idea was that although the believers could not all do travelling missionary work, by materially supporting those who did, they were counted as their fellow-workers. They were part of the work even though they remained at home.

:9 *I wrote somewhat to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the pre-eminence among them, does not welcome us-* The picture is of Gaius being a member of a church which had shunned Gaius because of the evil influence of Diotrephes. Gaius welcomed "the brothers" from John (:5,8), and so therefore would have been excommunicated for doing so (:10). It is the Lord who is presented in the New Testament as having "the pre-eminence". It is a lack of focus upon Him and His greatness which leads to the human tendency toward *personal* pre-eminence. "Whoever wishes to be first shall be last of all" (Mt. 20:28) is surely in view. We should wish to be last of all, that we might be exalted in due time. Diotrephes, the conservative elder who had enough power to excommunicate whole blocks of people from his church, is being presented as at the very bottom of the scale of spirituality. We need

to recognize such brethren as such, and seek to treat them as the littlest of the little ones. "Welcome us" is parallel with welcoming the brethren sent from John (:10). Attitudes to brethren in Christ are our attitudes not only to Him but to all other brethren. Hence in writing to Philemon, Paul argues that to receive Onesimus was to receive him personally (Philemon 12).

:10 *Therefore, if I come-* A visit to Gaius would mean John could also visit Diotrephes; they lived nearby to each other, which makes sense when we realize that Diotrephes had disfellowshipped Gaius from his local church.

I will bring to remembrance his works which he does, prating against us with wicked words, and not content therewith, neither does he welcome the brothers; and those that would, he forbids and throws them out of the church- Bringing to remembrance could imply some exercise of Spirit judgment against Diotrephes which required John's personal presence. Or it could just imply that he would confront Diotrephes over his behaviour.

John has just commended Gaius for receiving "the brothers", the mission workers from John's home church (:3). But the local church which had expelled Gaius would not receive those same "brothers", and in turn excommunicated any who would fellowship and support them. Neither would that church "welcome" John himself (:9). It was all the picture of daisy chain fellowship; if Diotrephes was against John, he was against the "brothers" from his church, so he was against Gaius who supported them, cast him out of the church, and then drove out any others who supported their missionary work. It was guilt by association; and it is all called "evil" in :11.

His "malicious words" were *poneros*, evil, the same term used in speaking of the Judaist system of opposition to Christianity as "the evil one" (see on 1 Jn. 2:13,14; 3:12; 5:18). Diotrephes was therefore likewise also a Judaist. He was "not content"; and it is only the grace of Jesus which makes man "content" [s.w. 2 Cor. 12:9 "my grace is *sufficient* for you"]. "Forbidding" is likewise a word associated with how the Judaists sought to "forbid" preaching to the Gentiles (1 Thess. 2:16), and the legalistic forbidding of little ones to come to the Lord (Mt. 19:14; Lk. 11:52; Acts 8:36; 10:47; 11:17). To 'cast out' of the church was to reflect in Christian terms how the Jews cast out from the synagogue those who accepted the Lord as Messiah (Jn. 9:22,34,35), just as they "cast out" the Lord Jesus from the vineyard of Israel (Mt. 21:39 s.w.). Diotrephes had the mentality of Judaism and was seeking to turn the Lord's church into a Judaist dominated synagogue. Casting the Lord's brother out of the church is to cast Him out; this should act as a sober warning to those well-respected church leaders who act in this way to this day. The same word is used about the 'casting out' to condemnation in the last day (Mt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). No matter how much nice speak is used, to cast a brother out of the church is to condemn him. It is God's intention that "there should be no schism in the body" (1 Cor. 12:25). If we refuse to break bread with validly baptized, good living brethren- then we are working against God. And if we then go on to disfellowship anyone who will not agree with our opinion on a brother, we are doing just what Diotrephes is condemned for doing.

"Throws them out..." is a term often used in contemporary literature about the exclusion of individuals from the clubs and societies which were common in Roman cities. Diotrephes was treating the church as if it were his personal club; and he was acting as if it were just a secular organization. This is at the root of so much dysfunction within churches; they are treated by their elders as if they are human societies. When the whole nature of the body of Christ is so different and unique in human experience. The contemporary literature repeatedly uses the term "throws them out" in the context of commenting that this is necessary for unity. John is taking the term and deconstructing it; for he has taught that unity is not uniformity, and is predicated upon the Lord's death and the presence of the Spirit in individual hearts. Not

upon excluding those who differ in policy about things like missionary work and supporting missionaries.

It could be that there is a chronological progression here. Prating against John personally, i.e. gossiping about and slandering him, left Diotrefes not content until he had done something worse; and so he refused to welcome or materially support "the brothers" who were mission workers for and with John (:3,5,7); and then he forbade [Gk. 'hindered'] others in his church from supporting them; and finally he threw out of the church those like Gaius for doing the good work of giving support to missionary workers. This is where the mania about disfellowship leads. And it happens so often to this day. It should not be presented in respectable spiritual terms as merely a case of being overzealous for God's truth. John calls such behaviour "evil", and it is. And the final absurdities, of disfellowshipping sincere believers for materially supporting the sincere missionary workers of a sincere apostle, all come about from a psychological and spiritual slide downhill. Hatred is as a darkness which blinds the eyes of such men, so that they cannot see where they are going (1 Jn. 2:11).

A fair case can be made that he received the Apocalypse *early*, well before AD70, and wrote his gospel and letters *afterwards*. In this case, the similarity of wording would partly be explained by the fact that the language of his Lord rubbed off almost unconsciously [as well as consciously] upon John's style of thinking, speaking and writing. Thus "If I come, I will bring up the things he is doing" (3 Jn. 10) reflects the Lord's style: "If you do not repent, I will come to you" (Rev. 2:5). There are many other examples- finding them is good homework for the enthusiast. Now the practical point is surely that we are living the essence of the Kingdom life now; we 'have eternal life' in the sense that we are experiencing the nature and quality of the spiritual life which by grace we will eternally live. And that life is the life of the Lord Jesus; in His life on earth we see a picture of the nature of the eternal life which we hope to live for evermore. Therefore understanding Him personally is to understand the good news of the future Kingdom of God.

:11 *Beloved, do not imitate such evil, but imitate that which is good. He that does good is of God. He that does evil has not seen God-* The "evil" in view was the guilt by association disfellowshipping of brethren and sincere missionary workers noted on :10. In the light of 1 Jn. 3:6, we could say that we see God insofar as we see the Lord Jesus, and live in His love. The doing of evil arose from not 'seeing God' which in turn meant that Diotrefes was not Christ-centered. He had not 'seen' the Lord Jesus, possibly connected with his Judaist leanings. We may well ask why Gaius would need to be warned not to "imitate such evil", when he had himself suffered from it. It is simply so, that the abused tend to abuse. This is a fact of observed human experience; and John urges Gaius not to practice the evil excommunication policy that he had suffered from. It is so easy to treat others as we have been. Instead of copying Diotrefes, who had "not seen God", Gaius was to imitate the "good", the One who "does good", who is '[born] of God', and who has "seen God". For we are to imitate or mimic [s.w.] the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 11:1). That One to be followed / imitated is primarily the Lord Jesus. Instead of psychologically being dominated by our abusers, we are to look not to them as role models, but to the Lord Jesus. Many of us were taught implicitly and explicitly that the harder line taken on matters of disfellowship, the more likely we were to be close to God. But here such behaviour is called "evil". And it is. Those who do these things have not seen God, Paul says.

But perhaps Demetrius is the one in view. Exhortation to imitate good spiritual examples is quite common: Heb. 13:7 "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and... imitate their faith"; 1 Cor. 4:16 "Be imitators of me"; 1 Thess. 1:6 "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord"; 1 Thess. 2:14 "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea"; Heb. 6:12 "that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises".

This helps us understand 3 John- it is a letter about three men, Gaius, Diotrephes and Demetrius. And Gaius is bidden follow Demetrius and not imitate Diotrephes. "Gaius" was one of the commonest names in the Roman empire, and there are three believers of this name mentioned in the NT; but it's quite possible we are simply intended to see him as a 'common John', every man in Christ who wants to do the right thing.

If we see / know God in the experiential sense, we will do no evil (3 Jn. 11). To have the true knowledge of Jesus Christ means we will not be barren [Gk. 'idle'] nor unfruitful (2 Pet. 1:8). When Zacharias wanted to have grounds for faith, he was simply told: "I am Gabriel...", the man like God (Lk. 1:19). The declaration of God's Name in Ex. 34:6,7 doesn't include statements like 'Trust in God! He'll help you!'. Instead we read of the grace, mercy, justice and inevitable judgment of God. Knowing and experiencing these more abstract things will lead us to a practical faith in God. Because David remembered God's Name, *therefore* He kept His law (Ps. 119:55 RSV). This is why the Bible uses the idea of 'knowing' God in the sense of knowing Him by experience, not just 'knowing' the right theory. Likewise John uses 'the truth' in the sense of not just correct knowledge but the way of life it brings forth.

:12 *Demetrius has the witness of all and of the truth itself*- As discussed on :11, Demetrius is set up as a parade example of who should be imitated, as opposed to Diotrephes. There is a strong tradition that John wrote from Ephesus; he says he is going to visit them, so this was clearly before his exile on Patmos. Irenaeus writes of "the church of Ephesus, founded by Paul, with John continuing with them until the times of Trajan". There has always been a grave memorial to John in a village near Ephesus. Patmos, to where John was exiled (Rev. 1:9), is just off the coast of Ephesus. We must therefore give full weight to the fact that the only other Demetrius mentioned in the NT is the chief silversmith at Ephesus (Acts 19:24). It could be that he repented and that is why he is set up as such a parade example; and why he "has the witness of all [men]". This makes sense if he was the silversmith, once so opposed to the Gospel, who openly repented. "And of the truth itself" is a strange phrase; unless we understand it to mean that the 'spirit of truth', or the Lord Jesus personally, made some special statement or witness to show that the conversion of Demetrius was indeed sincere. That to me is the only interpretation that makes any sense of this reference to a special witness to Demetrius "of the Truth it[him]self". Change is possible.

Yes, we also testify, and you know that our witness is true- This language of testimony being confirmed recalls how John has spoken and written at Jn. 19:35-37 and elsewhere. "The truth" refers to the spirit of truth, the Lord Jesus who is "the truth". "All" the Spirit filled brethren with John, and he himself, could testify that Demetrius was indeed genuine. This may have been thanks to a specific statement from the Spirit; but it likely refers to the way that there is an intuitive sense of another's sincerity when the spirit of Christ is in that person and also in those whom he or she meets. Presumably Gaius was unsure about Demetrius, and he is being assured that he does indeed have the spirit of Christ.

:13 *I had many things to write to you, but I am unwilling to write them to you with ink and pen*- The context of :12 speaks of the fellowship between persons created by them each having the same spirit of truth, that of the Lord Jesus. Written communication was one thing, but the synergy and nexus achieved by the meeting of spirit-filled persons was far superior to that. And that after all is why we still have the concept of church meetings and personal fellowship in our age, despite all the electronic possibilities of 'virtual' communication we now have. See on 2 Jn. 12.

:14 *But I hope shortly to see you, and we shall speak face to face*- John planned to visit Gaius, at which time he intended to confront Diotrephes (:10). See on :13 for the power of

face to face meeting. John's desire for this rather than simply written communication is a powerful challenge and is strangely relevant in our age of digital communication.

:15 *Peace be to you. The friends salute you. Salute the friends by name-* The wish of "peace" is a desire for the peace enabled by the Comforter, the gift of the Spirit possessed in the hearts of both John and Gaius (Jn. 14:27; 16:33; 20:19-22). John records how the Lord called those who would receive His spirit His friends (Jn. 15:5), and it is John who uses this title in addressing his brethren (3 Jn. 14). He reflected how the Lord saw him as his *friend*. And John realised that this was how he should see his brethren; and so must we.