

## GOOD AND EVIL IN THE CHURCH

### 3 John

**Intro:** On the first Sunday of this month of August, I completed a series of twenty-four messages when I went through the First Epistle of John, the Apostle of John. Then two weeks ago, before Jerry Bridges came to speak at our Family Camp, we considered together the Second Epistle of John. This morning it is my plan to look with you at the Third Epistle of John.

In none of these does the writer identify himself as the Apostle John. But A. T. Robertson said in his introduction to the First Epistle of John that “there are few scholars who deny that the Epistles of John and the Fourth Gospel are by the same writer” (VI, 199). And then he quoted another scholar who said that “in the whole of the First Epistle there is hardly a single thought that is not found in the Gospel” [of John] (*Ibid.*). Bishop Westcott said that if you compare the first eighteen verses of the Gospel of John with the first four verses of 1 John, you will be able “to see how the same mind deals with the same ideas in different connections” (*Ibid.*).

Devout expositors of Scripture have long held that the Apostle John wrote the Gospel of John, the epistles of John, along with the book of the Revelation, that he wrote under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and also that these were the last books that made up the New Testament. At the time that the Apostle John wrote these books, or books and letters, as far as we know, he was the last survivor of the apostles.

Now there are many things that we don't know about 1, 2, and 3 John. We really don't know what connection, if any, there was between them. We don't know to what group of Christians, or church, the Apostle John wrote 1 John. We don't know if there was any connection between 1 John and the two shorter epistles. Were 2 and 3 John written to an elect lady and Gaius who were members of the group to whom the first letter was written. It seems very reasonable that they were. But we do not know. We can only guess at what might have been the connection. If so, it may have been that the Apostle John wrote 1 John so that the people would know that in dealing with Diotrephes, although he seems to have been a church leader, they were dealing with a man who could not pass the tests that the Apostle John presented in that epistle. One thing that scholars do not agree on is the order in which these epistles were written. We assume, since they are called 1, 2, and 3 John, that they were written in that order. But that might not be the case. 1 John may have been the last epistle that the Apostle John wrote.

So we can only guess at what the relationship of these three epistles may have been to each other, if there actually was any. What we can be sure of is that they are a vital part of God's Word, and that they have a message, a very

important message for every generation of the Lord's people. That is why we are considering 3 John this morning. It has a message, or messages, for us today. And we probably ought to be reading it more than once a year like most of us do.

Third John is easy to outline:

- I. His message to Gaius (vv. 1-8)
- II. His message about Diotrophes (vv. 9-11).
- III. His message about Demetrius (v. 12).
- IV. His conclusion (vv. 13-14).

All right, let's begin at the beginning.

### **I. THE APOSTLE JOHN'S MESSAGE TO GAIUS (Vv. 1-8).**

There are several men mentioned in the NT who have this name, but it seems unlikely that this Gaius is mentioned any place else. He obviously was very dear to the Apostle John. He probably is included in the "my children" which John mentioned in verse 4. We do not know that the Apostle John was ever married, and so he was probably speaking of his *spiritual* children, either those whom he had led to the Lord, or those in whose lives he had been used for their spiritual growth. The Apostle John would have been older, possibly much older than Gaius, and so this is a verse of encouragement for all young people that by their walk with the Lord they can be a very necessary blessing to those who are older than they are in the Lord, and even to those who are much older.

How many people do you know who could be described like John described Gaius in **verse 2**? Too often the Lord's people have better physical health than they do spiritual health. We all have been, or can be, more careful about our physical health than we are about our spiritual health. We need to ask ourselves if we spend a comparable amount of time in the nurture of our souls in prayer and Bible reading and in fellowship with the Lord's people as we do in biking, or exercising, or swimming to keep our bodies well and strong. John wrote to Gaius that he wished "above all things" that he would prosper and be in health like his soul was prospering. This does not mean that Gaius was necessarily neglecting his bodily needs, but it does mean that he was strong and healthy spiritually, and that he was outstanding in his spiritual growth. Even regardless of the way we take care of our bodies, the older we get, the weaker we get. But in the spiritual life, the older we get, the stronger we should become. We don't know how old Gaius was, nor if he might have been afflicted in some way physically, but we do know that His spiritual life was an example of what John wanted his physical life to be. If some-one were writing to you or to me along this line, what would they be able to say? Would it be that he wished that spiritually you were as strong as you are physically, or would it be like the Apostle John said to Gaius. Sometimes physical problems are used by God to

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work in our lives to make us pay more attention to our spiritual needs – which we all have.

**Verse 3** indicates that the Apostle John had every reason to be thankful about Gaius. Some of the men who had recently been with Gaius testified about how the truth of God's Word was influencing the life of Gaius. His life and his character showed the impact that the Word of God, the truth, was having upon Gaius. He was living out the truth that had been worked into his heart. And this gave the Apostle John great joy. In fact he went on to say in **verse 4** that this was the "chiefest" of all of his joys!

There are many of you who are the parents of children. What is it that gives you the most joy about your children? Is it that they are walking consistently day after day according to the truth of God's Word, or is it something else like some athletic achievement? I see bumper stickers which say that my son or my daughter was an honor student at such and such a school. In these days when so many young people could care less about how they do in school, to have a child who is an honor student is something to be thankful for, but it is not the greatest of all things.

If the greatest joy of the Apostle was to hear that his children were walking in the truth of God's Word, then it must follow that the greatest of all sorrows is to have children who don't know the Lord, or to have children who claim to know the Lord, but you look in vain for evidence of salvation in the way they live, or the way they talk, or in the clothes that they wear, or would wear if you would let them.

Lucille and Carolyn and I were talking after breakfast yesterday, and Carolyn mentioned that a lady said to her that a parent can never be happier than his or her saddest child. A child, especially in a Christian home, where that child has been exposed to the teaching of God's Word, is not going to be happy if he or she is going the way of the world. If we have children who are walking with the Lord, let us not as parents take the glory for ourselves. Only God can change the lives of our children. And if our children are living the truth, let us rejoice and give the praise to God and to Christ and to the Holy Spirit. We can rejoice when our children do well in school, or when they do well in sports, or if they on their own are looking for ways to help others. There are many ways that our children give us joy. But there is no joy like the joy of seeing our children walking in the truth, living in obedience to God's Word. And this goes for our spiritual children as well as those who are our own flesh and blood.

If presently you don't have the joy that the Apostle John had regarding Gaius, don't give up. Keep praying, and keep loving them in spite of what they do. We have a God to Whom nothing is impossible. Many children who have been a grief to their parents, have been transformed by the power of Christ, and

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parents' grief has been changed to great joy. As I have studied 3 John I have wondered if the reason that the Apostle John's joy was so great was because there was a time when spiritually things had not looked good for Gaius. That may not have been the case at all, but it is a possibility.

Now if you have read 2 John recently, or if you were here two weeks ago when we went through 2 John, you will remember that in that epistle John reminded that "elect lady" not to support the wrong people, people who were not teaching the truth about our Lord Jesus Christ. But here in 3 John, John was commending Gaius for his support of the right people. When we are walking in fellowship with the Lord, we are going to want to have a part in making it possible for others to hear the Gospel or to be instructed in the truth of God's Word. That is one reason we are interested by prayer and by our gifts in the ministries of Jerry Bridges, of Paul Felix, and of Tim Huggins. And I include their wives with them. And there are undoubtedly others in whom you have a personal interest in the spread of the Gospel. In those days these missionaries would come in need of a place to stay, and in need of material support. Gaius had taken a special interest in those people who did not look to the world for their support. This is what John meant by "taking nothing of the Gentiles." Gaius was a leader among those who were, according to **verse 8**, "fellow-helpers of the truth."

Those eight verses are worth more time that we have to give to them today, but we must move on.

Our second point is:

## **II. THE APOSTLE JOHN'S MESSAGE ABOUT DIOTREPHESES (Vv. 9-11).**

Notice that the Apostle John had written to the church – there are only times that the word "church" appears in all three epistles, and they are all here in 3 John. See verses 6, 9, and 10. This evidently was just a letter saying that he was coming to visit them. But there was one man in the church who was not willing to receive him. His name was Diotrephes. He may have been an elder. He was a man who wanted to have the first place, and he evidently considered the Apostle John a threat to his position. He was proud, self-willed (as proud people are). He knew nothing about love for the people of God. He prated against the Apostle John, that is, he was continuously bringing false accusations against him, seeking to ruin the Apostle's reputation and testimony. And not content with just wicked talk, but he refused to accept others who were favorable toward the Apostle John, *and he would put them out of the church!*

It is tragic when men like Diotrephes make their way into the local church. But they do! There would be no way that Diotrephes would be able to pass the tests

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of 1 John as to how to identify a true child of God. He did not hesitate to commit sin, and then to continue with it. He showed a complete disregard for the commandments of Scripture. He showed no love for the Lord's people, even for the beloved Apostle John. He showed no regard of Jesus Christ. There can be only One Who has the preeminence in the church, and He is the Lord. Read Colossians 1:12-18.

I believe that the Apostle John wrote what is verse 11 in our Bible as a direct commentary and warning concerning the true nature of Diotrephes. He was evil through and through, and had no understanding of the nature of God nor of what happens when one becomes a child of God. The Bible doesn't tell us what happened to Diotrephes, but its silence on this subject of truly ominous.

Finally we come to:

#### **III. THE APOSTLE JOHN'S MESSAGE CONCERNING DEMETRIUS (V. 12).**

It does not seem that Gaius was acquainted with Demetrius. It seems unlikely that this Demetrius is mentioned any other place in Scripture although there is a Demetrius, a silversmith, referred to in Acts 19:23 and the following verses. There seems to be some merit to the idea that it may have been this Demetrius who delivered these epistles to the church, to the elect lady of 2 John, and to Gaius of 3 John. After John's strong words denouncing Diotrephes, he may have felt that Gaius would need some encouragement that Demetrius was a true child of God, and not a phony like Diotrephes was.

The Apostle John said three things in commendation of Demetrius:

- 1) He had a good report of all men. John expressed this in such a way so as to indicate that Demetrius had always had a good report of the people of God who knew him in the past, and this same report continued right up to the time Gaius was reading the letter.
- 2) And this was very important, he was commended by the truth. In contrast with Diotrephes, Demetrius would pass the tests of 1 John with flying colors. The Apostle John said that you could lay the Scriptures alongside of Demetrius, and you would find, not perfection (because none of us is perfect), but enough agreement to know that Demetrius was approved of God.
- 3) Third, the Apostle John gave his own commendation, and the commendation of his fellow workers. Note the "we." It was common in NT times for believers to share letters of commendation for a believer that was unknown to the believers to whom he was sent.

#### **IV. THE CONCLUSION (Vv. 13-14).**

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It is always better to speak face to face, but some matters cannot wait for a visit because they are too important. So again, as in 2 John, the Apostle had more that he wanted to write about, but he needed to get Demetrius on his way to Gaius before Diotrephes could cause any more trouble. The rest that he had on his heart, could wait.

**Concl:** In closing I want to take you back to a phrase which explains for us why

the early Christians were as diligent as they were, and faithful to the Lord, even though the consequences of their faithfulness often led to death. It is the phrase “for his name’s sake” in verse 6. What was the Apostle John talking about, “for his name’s sake”? Whose name? Obviously these early missionaries did not go forth to make a name for themselves. That was not even in their thought in any way. They went forth *for the sake of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*. A person’s name speaks of who he is, but also what he is. A person’s name speaks of all that he is, whether good or bad. We are told in Scripture that our Lord Jesus Christ has *a name which is above every name*.

Alexander Maclaren, a preacher of a past generation said this about the Name of our Lord. I am not quoting him directly, but taking his thoughts and expressing what the Name means in reference to our Lord Jesus Christ:

The name means substantially the same as the Person Jesus. . . It means the whole Christ as we know Him, or can know Him from the Word. It speaks of His Deity, of His perfect humanity, the sweetness of His life, the depth of His words, the gentleness of His heart, the propitiation of His sacrifice, the power of His resurrection, the glory of His ascension, the reality of His intercession for us at the right hand of the Father, and the triumph of His return.

And then Maclaren added this which is so important for us to remember. Again I am reading most of Maclaren’s words, but adapting some parts for greater clarity:

So then, brethren, the uniqueness and solitariness of His Name demands an equal and corresponding exclusiveness of devotion and trust in us. There is but one Christ. There is none other like He is. Therefore all of the devotion of our being is set to Him. On Him alone are we to repose our undivided weight, casting all our cares upon Him, and putting our trust only on Him. Lean on none other. You cannot lean too heavily on that strong arm. Love none other except in Him for his heart is wide enough and deep enough for all mankind. Obey none other for only His voice has the right to command. And lifting up our eyes as the apostles did on the mount of transfiguration, let us see “no man, but Jesus only.”

Do you see now why the Apostles were so jealous for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ? How important it is for people to hear the truth about Who Jesus

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Christ really is. The picture can be marred greatly by false teachers. But it can be marred just as much as when we profess to know Him but live just like people do who make no such a claim.

The epistles of John occupy a very timeless and important place in the Word of God because they emphasize the importance of being right about the Name of our wonderful Lord. All that we are and all that we do need to be directed every day “for His name’s sake,” just as we so often conclude our prayers, “for Jesus’ sake,” or “in Jesus’ Name.” If we are wrong about the name of Jesus, it makes no difference how many other things we may be right about. Glory to His Name, and to His Name alone!