

Series: 3 John

Title: The Heart of Christian Love

Text: 3 John 1-4

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Verse 1

John opened his third letter by saying, “The elder: To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.” The apostle opened his third letter in the same way he opened his second, by referring to himself as “the elder.” The title was one that was used of first-century pastors. It was used interchangeably amongst the young church with two other terms — shepherd and bishop (Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Peter 5:1-5). In using the term of himself, John employed a definite article in the Greek. The language conveyed, as one has said, a sense of authority.¹ John knew he was writing to correct and confront pride and sin within the church. As a result, he made a subtle reference to his God-given position as a pastor.

Whereas the apostle appealed to his apostolic authority when writing his first letter (1 John 1:1), he addressed the churches of Asian Minor with a pastoral tone in his second and third letter. His approach was perhaps grounded in a desire to exhibit his tender care and regard for believers amongst the churches. The disciple whom Jesus loved (John 20:2) had learned from his Lord to place high value on the greatest of all virtues, love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Notice that John’s letter was specifically addressed to a man named “Gaius.” The apostle’s first two epistles were addressed to the church at large, but a lone individual was the recipient of his second. Who was this man? His exact identity is uncertain. Gaius was a rather common name in the Roman Empire.² We are only left to speculation concerning who the man actually was. Logical deduction would inform us that many likely held some leadership position within the church. If John would have addressed a letter directly to a specific individual when writing about ecclesiastical problems, the man was quite possibly a pastor or overseer. He most certainly had some level of leadership responsibility within the church.

Although we may not be able to know who Gaius was, we can learn something from the way in which John addressed the man. He called him a “dear friend.” The language conveyed the idea of a “deep and genuine love.”³ John would repeat the title on three different occasions in his letter (3 John 2, 5, 11). He was emphatic in expressing his abiding affection for the man. The apostle whom Jesus loved knew well that love for other believers was of utmost importance in the life of the church. He had personally heard Jesus say, “This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:12-14). Perhaps John was intentional in expressing his love for the believers of Asia Minor because he knew love would go a long way in serving a lot of the interpersonal conflict and sinful behavior amongst the congregations (3 John 9-12).

It is important to pay attention to the way in which John qualified the love he had toward Gaius. He said, “...whom I love *in the truth*.” The apostle’s qualifier revealed that true Christian love honors the truth of God. One commentator has rightfully remarked, “Love does not function as some disconnected emotion with no substance or content. Without truth it will delve into mere sentimentalism. Love and truth are necessary companions. They go together.

¹ Akin, 239.

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 602.

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 602.

They work together. They must stay together.”⁴ The truth of God’s Word is what ties believers together in love. It makes them likeminded and gives them the same values. It produces a similar perspective in peoples’ minds and it sets the course of their lives in the same direction. Christian affection flows when God’s people are grounded in God’s truth. God’s Word “makes one a child of God and constitutes the basis of love.”⁵

John championed this reality throughout his letter. He wanted his readers to not mistake his appeals to love as calls for mere emotional displays of humanly-generated flattery and feigned friendship. In 1 John 3:18, he said, “Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth.” In 2 John 6, he said, “This is love: that we walk according to his commands. This is the command as you have heard it from the beginning: that you walk in love.” Later in his third letter he would call his readers to “be coworkers with the truth” (3 John 8). The apostle consistently held up the twin virtues of truth and love. He knew both were needed for the church to embrace a genuine commitment to the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). His appeals were in alignment with the teaching of Paul, one who urged the church at Ephesus to have a commitment to the truth and love (Ephesians 4:15). Both apostles knew that real Christian love is much more than man-centered sentimentality, emotionalism, or congeniality.

Verse 2

John continued his greetings in verse 2 by saying, “Dear friend, I pray that you are prospering in every way and are in good health, just as your whole life is going well” (3 John 2). The apostle’s words contained a greeting in which he expressed well wishes for both Gaius’ spiritual and physical state. In all generations, it has been customary for one to give well-wishes concerning the health and prosperity of another. Though expressed in different ways in differing cultures and languages, salutations like “How are you?” and “I hope you are doing well?” have been typical.

John used a common greeting salutation to express concern for the well-being of his friend, but he implemented it for purposes related to Christian truth. The Greek word rendered “beloved” was one of John’s favorite terms. He often utilized it to express his brotherly love for fellow Christians (1 John 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11). In his third letter, he actually used it four times within fifteen verses. He obviously had a desire to express his fervent desire for Gaius and the believers of Asia Minor.

In greeting his friend, John said, “I pray that you are prospering.” The word rendered “pray” is one that depicted “a strong desire for something.”⁶ Though it was sometimes used of the act of praying (Acts 27:29, 2 Corinthians 13:9, James 5:16), it often referred to one’s desires toward a person or thing (Acts 26:29, Romans 9:3, 2 Corinthians 13:7). One can see the relation of the word to prayer, as intercession is indeed an act of expressing our desires for a person to God.

From John’s words, we see that healthy believers are marked by a holy commitment to pray for one another. Spiritual joy and prosperity often grow when we commit ourselves to intercession (Job 42:10). It is for this reason that Paul often encouraged prayers on behalf of others from his readers (1 Timothy 2:1-3; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2). Believers who want to experience the love and joy that comes from Christian community and truth should commit themselves to praying on behalf of others. Self love festers when intercession is absent.

Notice that John’s desire for Gaius was the man’s prosperity. The word rendered “prospering” is the Greek word from which we get our English word “hygiene.” It was a

⁴ Akin, 240.

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 602.

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 182.

compound word made up of two words that, when strictly translated, meant “good way.”⁷ It was used to speak of one traveling down the right road.⁸ In time, it began to be employed figuratively of a person who was in good health. Interestingly, Peter used the same term to speak of his desire for his readers’ spiritual well-being by speaking of “the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:9).

The phrase “every way” qualified the nature of John’s desire. The apostle’s intent was to express his desire for the pastor to experience the blessing of the Lord in all domains of life.⁹ He wanted Gaius to prosper, not just in a spiritual sense, but in a physical sense as well. This is why he said, “just as your whole life is doing well.” The word for “life” in the original language of the New Testament was one that is commonly translated “soul.” Because of Christian salvation, John knew Gaius had a prosperous soul, but he wanted him to prosper physically as well.

Apparently the pastor had some sort of issue with his physical health. John’s greeting was intended to express well wishes for a speedy recovery. The apostle knew that physical ailments can be taxing on one’s soul and one’s participation in gospel ministry. Consequently, he desired physical healing for his friend.

Despite Gaius’ physical ailments, the man enjoyed spiritual prosperity. John accentuated this reality by speaking of the way in which his “whole life” was “doing well.” Again, the original language of the text used a noun that was often used of the soul. The apostle subtly reminded Gaius of his spiritual blessings in Christ. Though his physical circumstances were less than ideal, his spiritual standing was secure. Gaius had claim on the promises of 2 Corinthians 4:16 — “Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day.”

John’s words can provide comfort for believers of all ages. Like Gaius, each Christian enjoys spiritual prosperity in the Lord. Though disease, decay, and disabilities may plague our outward bodies, we have confidence that our soul is perfectly intact with the Lord. Yes, we can pray and hope for physical health and prosperity, but we ultimately place our greatest confidence in the spiritual prosperity we have in Christ. Though our outward nature is continually perishing, our inward nature is continually renewed by the Holy Spirit.

John’s words also instruct concerning the way in which we should have a healthy and holy concern for the well being of others. The Great Commandment calls us to such concern (Matthew 22:37-40). So does the Golden Rule, which is the a means of fulfilling the Great Commandment (Matthew 7:12). In essence, Christian love is an act of taking our attention off of ourselves and putting it on another. The Bible says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

Verse 3

In 3 John 3, John said, “For I was very glad when fellow believers came and testified to your fidelity to the truth—how you are walking in truth.” Apparently, John had heard a report that Gaius and other brothers and sisters were walking faithfully with the Lord. “Fellow believers” had reported back to the apostle on the spiritual condition of the believers to whom he wrote. In the original language, the verb translated “came” appeared as a present participle; thus, it conveys a repeated action. The sense of the verse was that members of Gaius’ church had visited John more than once.¹⁰ Perhaps iterate teachers had traveled back and forth between

⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 602.

⁸ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 180.

⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 602.

¹⁰ Robertson, 260.

the apostle and his readers on multiple occasions.¹¹ Maybe they were responsible for delivering John's letters. Whatever the case, a group of believers had reported back to John that the recipients of his letters were exhibiting great faithfulness to God's truth. It seems his first two letters had made a positive impact on the churches.

The specific report from the brothers detailed Gaius' "fidelity to the truth." In the Greek, the language is emphatic by position. The text literally reads, "Brothers came and testified of you — the truth." John wanted to draw special attention to his reader's faithfulness. Plain and simple, Gaius was marked by an allegiance to the truth handed down by Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles. The man was known for a personal commitment to what was true.

John further described Gaius' commitment to divinely disclosed truth by saying, "...you are walking in the truth." The word translated "walking" is one that was often used figuratively in the ancient world to speak of how one conducted his or her daily life. John implemented the term in the present tense, depicting a continual action. Gaius wasn't one who just made verbal professions of allegiance to the truth. He lived his life in alignment with him. God's realities marked both his beliefs and behavior.

Such is God's desire for all of his children. Jesus provided an embodiment of God's truth (John 14:6) and Christians are spiritually saved (Colossians 1:15), strengthened (Ephesians 6:14), and sanctified (John 17:17) by His truth. Believers should regularly evaluate their lives to make sure their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors are in alignment with God's realities. A life of joy and blessing is only experienced within the parameters of the Lord's divinely disclosed truth.

Verse 4

John closed the greeting to his letter by saying, "I have no greater joy than this: to hear that my children are walking in truth" (3 John 4). The term rendered "greater" constituted a double comparative in the original language of the text.¹² John wanted to place great weight on his experience of joy. He found great delight in seeing other believers living faithfully to God's truth. For John, the expectation of discipleship was plain — Christians were to diligently direct their lives in accordance with God's revelation of Himself through the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles. If John the apostle placed great value on God's truth, it stands to reason that the modern church should as well. Every meeting time and each ministry endeavor should make God's Word a high priority. Real joy will flow amongst the body when truth is known and obeyed.

¹¹ Akin, 241.

¹² Robertson, 260.